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**Prayers, Poems and Questions;
Plays that point toward the unknown**

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**Prayers, Poems and Questions;
Plays that point toward the unknown**

by

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Thesis

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Dedication

My work here is dedicated to my mother and father for framing my life with stories and travel, and for raising me close to the wild.

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I would like to acknowledge my professors Steven Dietz, Kirk Lynn and Suzan Zeder for their incredibly generous and dedicated pedagogy, and for the plays they have written and are writing right now. You all continue to challenge and inspire me.

To my collaborators, Stephanie Busing, Abe Koogler and Gabrielle Reisman. Thank you for reminding me how much fun the theatre can be and for teaching me to work for it.

To Fiore Tedesco and Lucy. You two are my home.

Abstract

**Prayers Poems and Questions;
Plays that point toward the unknown**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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This thesis document explores the open systems I have used to develop my plays throughout my three years at the MFA Playwriting Program in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin. Looking closely at two plays, *The Fault* and *Still Now*, from inspiration to production, I will chart how they are structured as open systems; the former a prayer, the later a question, and ask how these plays activate an audience towards the unknown.

Table of Contents

Open Systems	1
<i>The Fault</i>	22
<i>Still Now</i>	113
Bibliography	183

Open Systems

My plays are unflinching, hard won, beautiful examinations of lives just on the outskirts of the everyday. My protagonists are artists, criminals, addicts, and survivors, people--just like us--struggling to find their own way. They love wildly and in the weirdest ways, want to go to church but never will, need help but can't ask. They are characters you don't usually see on stage, yet somehow deeply understand. Whatever the subject, my dialogue mixes naturalism and poetry, riding the line between the mundane and the sublime; poems are written to socks and underwear and soup, while hopes and fears get reduced to everyday colloquialisms. My plays function as prayers or questions, theatrical events that reach toward the unknown. They are woven together from personal stories, stolen from plays I love, carefully built to create an open system in which the audience is given the room to reach toward the unknown.

Open system plays are consciously crafted to not answer all the questions. Plays happen in real time before a live audience, the production only exists if the audience is there. An open system gives room for this audience to have their own experiences, to participate in the meaning making of the story, and finally to communally experience the unknown. Open systems require three component parts: an invitation, a conscious plot structure and moments of the unknown. The invitation is a clear path meant to guide the audience into the unknown.

“Don’t worry friend, this is a story about three sisters. You’ve got siblings too, right? No? But you know a woman with two other sisters? Great. This is a lot like her.” A clear invitation will keep an audience on board for trickier terrain. An open system is conscious that structure informs content. To put an audience in the space to experience the mystery of the content you must structure their experience just right. Every play requires its own structure to achieve this. When you have invited an audience into the world of the play and crafted the structure of the play to mirror the content, you can then shape moments of real unknown. I am a playwright, but I know that the best experiences in the theatre- and in life-are way beyond words. My plays frame the space where words can fail, giving the audience the space to experience something beyond language.

Prayers, poems and questions are all open systems that accommodate the unknown. To pray is an active need that summons character, conflict, desire and the great unknown-call it God, call it faith, call it ignorance. “Dear God, please oh please let my sister find her way through this addiction.” There is the suppliant, there is the sister, there is this addiction, and all its messy ramifications. Finally there is the activation of the prayer toward the unknown. Prayers can be private and public, but in the theater all prayers are witnessed, and so the audience is given an active role. To witness is not passive. We call for witnesses at our weddings and funerals. A witness can be indicted for little more than being present and sharing a moment.

Poems contain the infinite in the finite, a string of words that continue to unlock images and change meanings. Poems are meaning-making machines. *I am the fire on the beach, debris after the storm, the winter flower on the water.* Sure, maybe this character is saying they have come to terms with a great struggle, but everyone in the room is seeing fires and storms and cold flowers and water. The distance between the character's intention and the imagery makes an open system: the space for us to struggle with meaning. The struggle, like the poem, keeps meaning fluid.

All questions pose for answers. Bad questions have only one answer, good questions have many answers. Great questions lead to more questions. How do we grapple with the distance between the things our bodies can do, birthing, dying, killing, loving that our minds simply cannot fathom? Turn a play into a question, rather than a statement, and watch new questions unfold all around you. Pose a question to your audience and watch them sit up in their seats and lean forward.

My plays are personal, not autobiographical. This distinction is important to me. I don't write plays to tell you how something is. I write plays about the people I love with the hope that the making of the play will bind collaborators together and that the subject of the play will create the conversations I keep trying to have. In this thesis I am looking at two plays I've written during my time as a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin, *The Fault* and

Still Now, charting how they are structured as open systems; the former a prayer the latter a question, and asking how these plays activate the audience.

Beginnings

I began writing plays because I was a struggling actress in search of better roles. I wrote, produced and performed in several plays in New York and Los Angeles, building productions out of good friendships and some ideas about character. Producing taught me a great deal about placing a play on a stage. I learned about asking for help, using constraints as inspirations, and the importance of clean bathrooms with plenty of toilet paper. The first play I wrote alone was a play about a trip to Marfa, Texas, I had taken with my mother in 2004. The first draft was fifteen pages of sketches about the geography of West Texas, and the voices of these two homeless kids that kept popping up in my head. With so little on the page I was incredibly lucky to find a good, patient director, Stephanie Yankwitt, who wanted to work with me on the script. Stephanie and I spent a year workshopping and revising before taking the show into production at The Dorothy Strelsin Theatre in New York City in 2008. She shepherded me from a beginning idea to a complete script, from a script through a production. Working with Stephanie I began to learn to listen to actors, when to take notes and when to leave them behind, and most importantly how to continue to apply pressure to a script to prepare it for production.

When my husband Fiore and I had our daughter Lucy, I discovered that writing was the thing I could do as a stay at home mom, and suddenly writing was no longer a way to get onstage and perform but a way to take ownership of the stories I wanted to tell. In the two years that I was at home with Lucy, playwriting was the space of my individuality, stolen time during naps and late nights. In that time I began to take the work seriously (and look seriously at how much I had to learn) and began to realize that the shape of our lives at the time could not contain the amount of energy I wanted to give to my writing. Realizing how much I had to learn, and how much structured space I wanted to learn it in, I began to look seriously at graduate programs. Actually, I only looked at The University of Texas' MFA playwriting program. Looking back it is astonishing how much the graduate program has changed me. If acting and starting a family gave me the work I wanted to do, The University of Texas MFA playwriting program has given me the way to do it.

The Fault

The first play I wrote at The University of Texas was called *The Fault*. I was incredibly lucky to watch it begin in my first semester, revise it throughout the first year and go into production in the second year, opening in The Brockett Theatre in December 2013 of my last year. It was the play I worked on throughout graduate school at every stage of development. *The Fault* explores the lives of three sisters, struggling to reconcile the culture of their itinerant family, with their future hopes and disparate ambitions. Isolated between the

redwood forests and the Pacific ocean the Davis family has finally stopped running and is really-finally- trying to make a home for themselves. But as the problems of being on the road fade away, the real problems, unexamined addictions and overlooked mental imbalances begin to shake the familiar structure they've worked so hard to create.

This play is quite literally a prayer for my sisters and is based on my experience of watching them struggle with addiction. There is a moment, right in the middle of the play, where the youngest sister, Star takes the oldest sister, Angie out into the woods to make a secret pact. To confirm the pact Star says a blessing. She receives the blessing from out of nowhere:

STAR: (surprisingly confident voice) A blessing on sisters who grow in the pattern they were flung, may we hold each other and grow strong in our willingness to go above and beyond this inheritance. A blessing on our perpetual hunger, may it find something more meaningful than drugs and candy to devour. A blessing on forgiveness, may we remake ourselves in whatever likeness we see fit. (She thinks a moment) What else?

ANGIE: um, strength.

STAR: Yeah, strength..go ahead Angie.

ANGIE: A blessing on strength. I want to help you.

STAR: And help yourself.

ANGIE: And help myself.

STAR: Good. Oh, Amen.

ANGIE: Amen.

This moment in the play is me, Katie Bender, saying a prayer to my estranged sisters. It is not the climax of the play, it is the heart. The magic of the thing is that in production, after years of workshop and months of rehearsal and after lights and costumes, good actors and directors, every night for a week an audience gathered and we all witnessed this prayer for my sisters. Do you think they heard it? Do you think the audience prayed for their own siblings? Do you think the actors, designers and director did? I believe *The Fault* functions as a prayer and that Star's blessings activates the audience as witness. However, it took me from initial idea all the way through production to realize that was what I was working towards.

My first writing workshop at UT was with Suzan Zeder. I was a wreck. I felt unbelievably insecure and also weirdly competitive. Mostly I was afraid I wouldn't have anything to write, that I would be exposed as a phony. Suzan asked us to wake up every morning and make time for tensegrities and then write. Tensegrities are a series of specific physical motions that are matched with specific breathing exercises. They are based on Buckminster Fuller's notions of tensional integrity, in which the compression of tension keeps an object solid while also appearing weightless. The exercises are meant to clear the mind and give you strength. I did them. Very early in the morning. For a month. I would

go outside and do the exercises and breathe and feel stupid and unprepared and then I would start to fiddle around on paper about my California sisters-how weird and wonderful they were when we were kids. For whatever reason, every morning my sisters were on my mind. Somehow the movement and the memory felt connected. Later, I remember Suzan asked us to create the physical motion of the scenes as an improvisation with a partner and I began to see how Star, the play's protagonist, continually had to drag everyone around her into her world, into her attention. This constant pulling down and in became the physical embodiment of the story itself.

Further along in the semester Suzan had us create a model for the world of our play. I made a little house in a huge woods with spirits in the trees and papers falling down and the Pacific Ocean crashing at the base of the cliffs. The geography of the world answered so many questions. Not just that we were in California, but that the pressure of the woods against the ocean was the metaphor for the smaller pressures that the family was struggling to survive against.

Rooting the early drafts of *The Fault* in a specific geography, and pinpointing the physical motion of Star and the play as a whole, gave me a great deal of room to play in. I know the enormity of those redwoods, and what it's like to live next to the ocean. Geography taught me conflict. The pressure between the redwoods and the ocean pressing into this tiny unstable house was

where the play began. With revision I began to see that the geographic pressure pointed me towards the family in conflict which, very late in the game, led me to story. Similarly, the physical embodiment of Star constantly grabbing attention and pulling everyone in to her, led me to her central objective, which is to get help with her addiction. Moving from instinct, I created the frame of the play with geography and physicality. What I didn't have yet was a clear plot.

Part of the MFA playwriting program includes sending students off to writing retreats or conferences during the summer to observe how they function. The first summer I went to the Orchard Project in the Catskill mountains. Given five days to my own devices I worked to take the loose evocative pieces that were the current draft of *The Fault* and put them into a more familiar story structure. This part of playwriting has always felt incredibly muscular to me, and it meant building story points: inciting event, rising action, climax and ending. Then I traced each characters path throughout the draft, recalibrating each character arc to make a whole. (Given a second production of this piece I would want to track back and look closely at the parents, Bill and Sarah's arcs, asking whether their stasis is a choice or if they are trying to do something else but failing). Sherry Kramer, with whom I took a workshop in the spring of my first year, talks about a play as a map. Each play has it's own true north, it's own key. By starting a play with the evocative parts-the set, the physicality-I was able to build a map of the play without thinking there was something I needed to write. By building a play with the evocative parts I didn't short circuit the

exploration. I found the story of the play. It was only in production that I began to see how, beyond the story, the play could function as a prayer.

Going into rehearsal for *The Fault* in the fall of 2013 I felt keenly aware that we-the director Charlie Otte, the designers, the actors and crew-were making something for an audience. Suddenly old questions arose with new urgency: Does Star die? What year is it? How did they buy this house? I didn't want to lose my audience to confusing details or bad questions. I also knew the draft needed work and that I hadn't touched it in over a year. Charlie was wonderful about giving me a ton of space to work in. But where to begin? I listened to the actors during rehearsal, got amazing notes from the designers, haunted the rehearsal room, started smoking, stopped smoking and finally started writing.

The play begins with Star returning home after two days missing. I wanted to clarify what the significance of her absence was for everyone and use it to frame how this family operates. So I added two scenes: a split scene of the family responding to her return and a new poem for Star. The poem is something Star is proud of, something she gets strength from. I had known for some time that Bill's character needed the most work. I gave Bill a very clear plan of action. In retrospect I didn't give Bill enough fight for this plan and am already looking forward to the next round of revisions.

Spending a month in rehearsal I became increasingly aware of my own sisters, the California sisters, and how they are quite a ways into their recovery and living full healthy lives. I realized the play needed some recognition of this recovery. I built the ending, choosing for Bill and Jane to move on, Angie to begin her recovery and Star to hope for hers as the shows final moments. My intention was to ask the audience to witness the sisters' beginning steps toward recovery and change -not in some bullshit sentimental way, but in the way that is hard and uncertain but also very possible.

The Fault is about family and addiction and is part of a larger personal conversation I need to have. To have that in a script, with collaborators, and with an audience means creating the space that is harrowing and fun and unescapable (just like addiction) while pointing towards recovery, which is sometimes possible. Because the play is experienced between collaborators and audience, I owe everyone the space within the production to connect the story to their own lives. The audience's journey of reaching for the story mirrors my journey in discovering that story. Not because they know who these people are, but because they see how hard they are trying. What we all recognize is effort. Effort is the physical manifestation of prayer. The audience and collaborators lean into the prayer of these characters trying and trying. Moments I am most proud of during production were when collaborators incorporated their own family stories into the production. Stephanie Busing folded pictures of her sisters when they were little into the scenic design. The actress Ellie McBride

wore her sister's necklace throughout the show. Much of rehearsal was spent story telling about everyone's families and in this way the production represented a larger conversation about family and inheritance.

It is both tidy and true that the playwrights I read the most before graduate school were Sam Shepard and Naomi Wallace. I always admired the way Shepard's extreme American geographies framed the playing space and the content of the conflict. Two brothers, on the edge of a desert, battle over what is gained from being civilized. Shepard always reminded me of my father who is a dedicated wanderer, and has been following his personal manifest destiny his whole life. Wallace's plays are filled with stage magic that point toward the unknown. In *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, a character slaps at the air, while another character, in another part of the stage, receives the beating. In *One Flea Spare* a character reaches into her wound to prove a point. In Wallace's plays bodies and space are equally porous. My mom introduced me to Naomi Wallace's plays when she was in graduate school. She also introduced me to the theatre and all its magic. It doesn't surprise me at all that the first play I wrote in graduate school would be rooted in physical gesture and a specific geography-influenced by Shepard and Wallace and, of course, in response to my mom and dad.

Still Now

Work on *The Fault* started with instinct which led to the plays function as a prayer, *Still Now* was always intended to function as a question, and the work was trying to find a story and structure to support that function. In September of 2009 my daughter was born. In September 2010 my good friend Clare was diagnosed with cancer. I spent nine months expecting my body to do something, to make something I could not comprehend. Clare spent five months expecting her body to do something she couldn't comprehend. She died in February of 2011. During my pregnancy Clare and I talked a lot about what it was like to hold the growing certainty of inevitable mysterious change in the body. We couldn't talk about it like that while she was dying. In her last month Clare asked her partner to make her an impossible memorial. One of the many acts her friends were asked to perform at this memorial was to run a five hundred meter sprint with the precision, grace and ambition of an Olympian. While running I realized Clare taught us to be wild and brave and weird and hard working with our bodies. I knew I wanted to write a play for Clare that functioned as a question about how are bodies can do the things our minds cannot understand.

The play started in Steven Dietz's Narrative Strategies: Time class. I worked on it through Steven's fall workshop, Kirk Lynn's Professional Development Workshop in the spring and then started a Butoh Workshop outside of class, led by Rudy Ramirez and Abel Coehlo in the fall of 2013 in preparation for a production in UTNT (UT New Theatre) in February of 2014. The play follows Annie, a modern dancer who, after witnessing the fall of the

twin towers, heads to Japan to study Butoh, looking for a dance form that expresses the destruction she can't comprehend. Ten years later, Annie is diagnosed with stage four cancer and returns to Butoh to prepare for her final dance. *Still Now* confronts us with the accelerated motion of a woman learning and losing her body, accompanied by the doctors, teachers, friends and lovers that become her partners in movement. As an open system *Still Now* is crafted as a question: what can our bodies teach us that our minds cannot fathom?

In Steven Dietz's Time class, we looked closely at how the time structure of a play informs or complicates the content. I began to see the many ways that structure informs content. A play that goes forward in time chronologically has a different message than the same play told backwards. I began to question how the time structure of my plays could inform my intention with the piece. During the class we read Paula Vogel's *Long Christmas Ride Home* and I found a theatrical narrative structure that seemed an accurate structure for looking at the subject of death. The play is about the death of Vogel's brother Mark and uses narration, puppets and compressed time to touch on the mysteries of his absence. In a letter Vogel wrote to Steven Dietz about her use of time in this play she says she

became fascinated by morality and cycle plays, the anachronisms, and the sense that all moments are the same moment in the mind of God, that linear time is a mortal concept. I[*she*] became, of course, in terms of *LONG XMAS RIDE*, particularly interested in Thornton

Wilder's gloss on Noh plays, which like our medieval drama, is also beyond linear time through the use of the ghost plays (Vogel 2/2/07).

I was particularly struck by the notion that all time is one time. That felt accurate to the mystery of dying. The first draft, then titled *Animal*, was framed through narration and held several different times simultaneously on stage. It is worth noting that the earliest draft was built as part of a "Turns" exercise in Steven Dietz's workshop, in which we were asked to frame the play before a major event, use 3 characters, and employ 3 turns (surprise, revelation, reversal, escalation or paradigm shift) per page. Much of the DNA of the play, and why it moves so quickly, is because it was built on these turns.

During workshop someone said that it felt more like a really beautiful memorial than a play-a note that stung enough for me to know it was accurate. In grappling with making the play really engage an audience, and because of feedback from Kirk Lynn and Anne Kauffman (my guest respondent during the play's Professional Development Workshop) I began toying with the notion of taking out all the direct address (the part I really loved) and asking my characters to do a little bit more heavy lifting with the action. Anne, in passing, mentioned the weird play that is disguised as the normal play. This idea really resonated with me, and the more I thought about it, I realized that is essentially what cancer is...an aberrant cell that behaves like a normal cell until it doesn't. I read Siddhartha Mukherjee's really beautiful book "The Emperor of all Maladies",

which is a biography of cancer, and I began to imagine structuring my play like a cancer cell. This meant it would read like a normal play until something inside began to take over and break it. Both the original draft and the current revision, titled *Still Now*, were inspired by external structures that seemed to do justice to the content of the play. Form is content and visa versa. Unlike *The Fault* which was built on content that led to structure, *Still Now* began with a structure that I thought could do justice to the content. My process of discovering the structure of the play is mirrored in the audience's journey through the play. We follow two time periods that begin to unravel until the past and present meet in the moment that Annie dances herself to nothing.

Claire's death and Lucy's birth touched on mysteries of the body we cannot fathom. Maybe words aren't even good enough. I think that is why I am drawn to theater. It creates a living story where words can fail. I cannot write the experience of losing my body, but perhaps I can create a performance where all of us can experience some of that mystery. There is a moment, almost at the end of *Still Now*, where Annie asks a series of questions:

Annie, propped up against something, screams at a piece of paper.

ANNIE

Why should I have to? Why choose now? How could you? How much it will it will it will cost? It will? Who I could pay? How to make it? How could anyone else? What to do with? How could anyone? How could my choice? How could you not? Where does it?

Why did it? When will I? Where? Where? Why? How? When? How much? When? Why? Why? Why?

Silence.

Annie is trying and trying to understand the death she is about to experience. Because questions activate the listener, the audience cannot help but also struggle to answer Annie's questions...which of course cannot be answered. In that moment the audience and Annie together struggle to make sense of death. In the next moment, Annie Too (a child who has haunted the play as a manifestation of Annie's past) steps on stage and takes on Annie's role.

ANNIE TOO (off stage)

Ben? Ben?! Ben!!!

Ben and Annie turn slowly in unison. Ben exits the stage and returns with Annie Too in the wheel chair. From now on Ben will care for Annie Too, Annie will watch on.

ANNIE TOO

My skin's all dry and hot and itchy and tingly and I can't eat and I can't swallow and I'm so hungry. I want a burger, no orange juice, no parmesan, no avocados. My tummy hurts and I can't breathe and my back hurts-

The reality of the play shifts. The audience is asked to make the unexplainable leap to following a new actress take on the role of Annie's physical aches and

wants while Annie herself will begin to let go. The audience's cognitive leap mirrors the events of the play, putting us in the space to witness the impossible.

Still Now is intentionally built for collaborators. The play asks for a choreographer to build the dance portions of the piece and a director with a strong sense of "bodies in space" story telling. There are places in the text I've left intentionally open ended for the actor to choose each night how to play, and sections of text that are in Japanese without translation. This play is built on an open system, like *The Fault*, with invitation and mystery, but because the center of the story is how bodies deal with death, the room for the unknown is much larger. I do not mean to say that because the content of the script is so mysterious that I, the playwright, am off the hook for any of it. Quite the opposite: because the center of the play is the unknown, I am responsible for creating a system that will hold the audience to look at the death. Working with Rudy and Abel, placing Butoh choreography next to actors in a story, I began to see how layering dance and narrative could be tricky. If the dancers were embodying the thing the actors were talking about, the dance felt extraneous. So too if an actor seemed to comment on a dance the dance lost its power. My favorite moments of the forms working together were when a story point would land, then suddenly the dancers-who somehow I'd forgotten about-would shift and the impact of the story point would change. In rehearsal I began to realize that if the script is going to make the space for the dance it has to be framed clearly in a way that furthers (rather than mimics) story. I am still working on

this. Meaning that the unknown elements in any open system deepen the story, rather than simply revealing and then concealing a strange vista.

Working forward

I want to make plays that are active. Plays that pray and ask questions. I want to write plays as gifts and plays that promise collaboration. The labor of playwriting takes years and years, requires inventing a new structure to work with new questions and many many drafts to get from page to stage. In order to really engage with the work I have to believe that the plays actively function in my life. Looking back at the plays I've written in graduate school I have been charting a course that brings me closer and closer to my collaborators and audience. With *The Fault* I brought my family into the room and hoped that my collaborators and audience would do the same. With *Still Now* I created a play that required my collaborators to bring their own mediums to the text. In the last year of graduate school, and with my favorite collaborators, designer Stephanie Busing, and playwrights Abe Koogler and Gabrielle Reisman, I began making plays that literally immerse the audience in the story. For UT's Cohen New Works Festival in the spring of 2013 we created *Slip River*, which took the audience through a classroom and down into the traps and back staircases under the B. Iden Payne stage, following Sly-an escaped orphan looking for a home. The show was a success and such a pleasure to make that we created a theatre company, Underbelly, with the mission of telling compelling stories that take our audiences into unusual spaces in the most spectacular way possible. I see now

that I have been writing plays to get in the room with other people. My open systems are a way of inviting collaboration, of working with others in an effort to create these moments where words can fail.

Graduating this May doesn't feel like closure. It feels like the next step in continuing my work and expanding my home. I'm really excited to take *Still Now* to The New Harmony Project in May and already wondering how the script will change in response to new collaborators. Also in May we will open our second Underbelly show which is even more ambitious in how we integrate audience with narrative structure. Mostly I'm ready to start writing the next play. Ten years ago I started making plays as a way of getting on stage to perform. Five years ago writing plays was the way to reclaim my creative space while starting a family. Now playwriting has become a way to work with the collaborators I admire, trying to get closer and closer to the messy unknown between and all around us. In forty years, when my hair has gone white and my skin turned to paper, when I have grandchildren and a garden, I want to write a great play that is an open window-a simple structure to frame the sky.

The Fault

A play by Katie Bender

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23Characters:

Star: 14. A poet, dreamer, bright & childish

Jane: 17. Hard working, clear & tough

Angie: 24. Childish, angry, needy & loyal

Bill: 52. Ready to get back on the open road

Sarah: 45. Tired of running

Setting:

A ragged house pressed between the redwoods and the pacific ocean.

A note:

Like a coastline in the fog, the stage should look stark and beautiful and almost impossible. The pressure on this house, and by extension the family, pressed between the ocean and forest is ever present. The playing space within the house is as spare and evocative as possible. This is not a play about a living room, this is a play about a little house on a big cliff.

Grace is the central ritual of the family, it is each members private and public chance to speak their wishes. I've put in bold the pieces of the grace that must stand out, the rest is to be read soto-voce, but with full conviction.

I will be your screech and crash if you will be my crutch and cast.

-TV on the

Radio

For my sisters.

Prologue

A small raggedy house sits center stage. The house, built on stilts, is raised above the stage and surrounded by a porch deck. Under the house is an old pickup truck. Behind looms a great redwood forest, before and spilling into the orchestra is a rocky cliff with a jagged staircase that leads down to the Pacific Ocean.

Star, speedy and pacing, in the living room, speaks to the audience.

STAR: I didn't sleep, didn't sleep for several cycles, you know those cycles?

Those big sun cycles. Man, I saw seven dawns, the sea turned pink, the forest finally shut the fuck up, the sea turned pink and fed me, like an adaptor, like a battery and I'm telling you, I got a charge, that was, that was a jolt, that was good, that I need, I need, I need-then I realized, man I could skip the waiting cycle, if I only ever ate pink things, you know, food that is pink, then it would be like my personal dawn. Forever. Think of all the food that is pink! Bubble gum, cotton candy, strawberry ice cream, strawberries, certain melons like watermelon and cantaloupe and Captain Crunch and Lucky charms, some types of apples,

ham, sometimes ham is pink, Twizzlers, Jellybellies, cherry yogurt, pink glazed donuts, cupcakes, cakes, sprinkles-

A loud crash. The lights go out. The sound of someone falling through the forest canopy.

Act I, Scene 1

Highway lights up on Angie in the truck, she peels herself off the steering wheel. She's blown a tire. She punches the ceiling.

ANGIE: God'damn.

She hops out of the cab of the truck.

ANGIE: Piece of shit.

She kicks the truck. Looks around.

ANGIE: Got pick the worst place, huh? Darkest hole of interstate nothing.

She kicks the truck again.

ANGIE: A hundred miles ago we were in Silver City, Silver City with beds and diners and mechanics and nice concerned ladies.

She walks a circle in the dirt. She stretches her arms out to imagined friendly strangers.

ANGIE: Lost child on god's highway, homeless, hungry, please help.

She tries another tactic. It's apparent she's good at this.

ANGIE: Can I get in your car ma'am? I'm just, I've been in a real abusive family situation and I'm just, I'm just trying to make my own way, and I could use a hand right now or-

A truck flies by and honks. Angie gives it the finger.

ANGIE: Go bang your mom you rubbernecking mother fucker!

She hops into the back of the truck, pulls out a low jack and a wrench. She growls.

ANGIE: Blown the spare though huh? Shit shit shit! *(She kicks stuff then whimpers)* Stuck puppy.

She drops behind the wheel and gets to work. A truck passes, the lights change.

Act I, scene 2

Lights up in the living room. Off stage we hear Sarah on the porch.

SARAH: Star? Is that you? Oh God. Star!

Sarah carries Star into the house. Star is unconscious in her arms.

SARAH: Honey? Wake up. Come on.

She places her on the table.

SARAH: Bill? Bill!

She feels for her pulse.

SARAH: She's not....I can't...you need a blanket sweetheart....a blanket...

Sarah moves around the room looking for a blanket in shock.

SARAH: Bill?

Bill enters and rushes to the table.

BILL: Star?

SARAH: What's the matter with her Bill. She's so cold.

BILL: Star honey? Star!

SARAH: Is she asleep?

BILL: I can't feel a pulse.

He starts to shake her.

BILL: We need to take her to the hospital.

SARAH: No no no no no-come on honey. Come on! Wake up!

Star suddenly takes a huge gasping breath.

SARAH: You're okay baby. You're okay.

BILL: Jesus. Star. Are you okay?

SARAH: Baby?

STAR: It's okay it's okay it's/ okay it's okay

BILL: We've been worried sick.

Star is rocking and holding herself.

STAR: It's okay, it's okay, okay-

BILL: Two days you were gone. You didn't call. Didn't leave a note. Pile of your poems and you just gone. What the hell were you thinking?

No response.

BILL: Your mother has been pulling her hair out. I'm stuck trying to interpret this
(the pages in his hand) this...I mean Jesus. I asked you a question, Star.

Still no response.

BILL: Are these poems about you?

Star doesn't move or appear to hear.

BILL: Are you trying to tell us something. To shock us? Don't ignore me.

Bill shakes her hard.

SARAH: Bill stop. Look at her, she's not really here.

BILL: Star, come on.

SARAH: Let her be.

BILL: She needs a doctor.

SARAH: She needs to rest.

BILL: She's freezing.

SARAH: It's cold outside.

BILL: Is she stoned or something?

SARAH: I can't tell.

BILL: We have to take her in-

SARAH: No way, absolutely not. We're not leaving this house-

BILL: To a hospital or something-

SARAH: They'll pump her stomach and call the authorities, then she'll be out of our hands, we're not doing that.

BILL: We can't take care of her here.

SARAH: I know what happens at those hospitals. If we leave home it will be worse.

BILL: Sarah!

SARAH: She's not leaving.

BILL: We don't even know what happened out there-

SARAH: I'm staying here with her.

BILL: Two days, I mean where did she sleep? It's not like she has any friends here.

SARAH: Poor girl.

BILL: I knew you shouldn't let her home school, I knew that was a bad idea.

SARAH: Oh no, this is not kindling for your homeschooling argument, you know-

BILL: She needs a little more discipline then-

SARAH: This started when Angie left, you know that-

BILL: She's fourteen, she shouldn't be alone all day-

SARAH: She needs a community, yes, and ever since Angie left she's been-

Star looks up suddenly.

STAR: Steinbeck knew about earthquakes, he must have, knew about personal fault lines, must have, all those families starting with the land and then shaking apart. We thought we made it out before the earthquake, but the earthquake is here. The earthquake is here.

Sarah wraps her in her sweater.

SARAH: You're okay now. You're home. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise.

STAR: I want some cotton candy. Mom, can we get cotton candy as soon as the check comes?

BILL: (*Referring to the papers*) Is this you-did this happen to you? It's-It's-

STAR: They're poems, just poems. I thought you'd like them and say good job.

BILL: (*he reads*) a list of things that fit in my mouth. A spoon, a prick, a flame, a rock-I mean, I'm your dad, how the fuck am I supposed to interpret this, is this you? Are you trying to shock me? Is this like a, like a scream for help?

SARAH: Bill. This isn't helpful.

BILL: Then you're just gone, just gone for a couple days, and I'm hearing these stories, bunch of kids, punks, started a fire at a Walmart, in the bathroom, burning shit in the bathroom, and someone was hurt. And I'm thinking where's my kid? Where the fuck is my kid? Is that my kid? Look at me when I'm talking to you Star. Where have you been?

STAR: I'm sorry.

BILL: Cops gonna show up and tell me all about it? You gonna end up in Juvi like your sister?

STAR: I really, I'm sorry...

SARAH: You need a bath, maybe some food, maybe you can tell me about it.

BILL: We're not done here.

SARAH: For now. We'll talk about it later when we're settled, have a drink or take a walk, cool down and I'll take care of her.

BILL: You're not looking this thing in the face.

SARAH: I'm her mother.

BILL: I'm not going to sweep this under the rug. I need a serious explanation from you Star.

They both stop and look at Star.

BILL: Well.

SARAH: Go ahead sweetheart.

STAR: I don't know, I don't know...

BILL: Bullshit.

SARAH: Enough, Bill. *(to Star)* Come on little lovey, you'll feel better after a bath and some rest, the morning is wiser than the night.

Bill stands helpless as Sarah leads Star out. The lights fade.

Act I, scene 3

Split scene with Star and Jane on one side and Bill and Sarah on the other. Very late at night. The lights are low.

JANE: You okay?

BILL: She must remember something.

SARAH: I don't know.

STAR: Look.

She lifts her shirt to reveal a huge gash on her side.

JANE: Jesus. What happened?

STAR: I don't know.

JANE: Let me get you something.

SARAH: Is it some kind of amnesia?

BILL: Come on Sarah. It's not selective. She's a teenager. She can't get away with disappearing for two days and then saying she doesn't remember.

STAR: I just get flashes of it.

Jane applies antiseptic

STAR: ow!

JANE: Sh. You getting high?

SARAH: She's a good kid.

BILL: I don't know that. I mean, do you know that?

SARAH: Yeah. I think I do.

STAR: My brain gets going and I can't stop it.

JANE: You must have been writing all day. We come home and there's pages everywhere.

STAR: Any good ones?

JANE: Yeah. I typed em up for you. See for yourself in the morning.

STAR: I remember getting high.

SARAH: She wouldn't hurt anyone.

STAR: I remember running.

BILL: No, she's not like Angie.

SARAH: I'll talk to her tomorrow.

BILL: I'll do it-

STAR: Fast like I'm a-

SARAH: Go easy though Bill.

STAR: I'm an animal.

SARAH: She's a child.

BILL: I will.

JANE: You can't mess with that shit anymore.

STAR: But I can't stop my brain.

JANE: You just have to make it stop.

STAR: I know, I know...easy for you.

Beat. Star calls out across the house.

STAR: Dad?

BILL: Yeah?

STAR: How'd you make the snakes quiet in Texas?

BILL: I sang to them sweetheart.

STAR: What did you sing dad?

BILL: Anything that made me feel brave.

STAR: Goodnight dad.

BILL: Goodnight shining Star.

Act I, Scene 4

Late or early light and the sound of the freeway. Angie appears with a tire and a backpack, also a black eye and a smile.

ANGIE: Idiot. Thought I'd lay down and take it, all for a ride into town.

She throws down the spare tire.

ANGIE: *(as the trucker)* Be quiet you little bitch be-BAM BAM BAM

She karate chops the air.

ANGIE: Take that fatty. BAM. I kill a motherfucker.

She changes the tire.

ANGIE: *(to the truck)* Get you fixed and get on home. You hear? *(As Ricky Ricardo)* You got some explaining to do Lucy. *(In her good daughter voice as she jacks up the truck)* Well dad, I'm, I'm sorry, I've been thinking about it a lot and I am really sorry. I shouldn't have stolen that cash. To be fair, it really was only five hundred dollars and you shouldn't have hid it under the couch pillows, because that is like a junkies number one, I mean, the number one place to look for loose change, because a junky doesn't really want like, your life savings, or like anything serious, a junkie really really only just wants enough to get high, and only just a little bit high because a junkie knows that getting high is not good, but getting not high is really fucking- *(back to the truck, pulling on the old tire)* ugh, come off!

She pulls the busted tire off and begins to work on the spare.

ANGIE: Mom. Please, Please, please please please please. I missed you mommy. Mom? Mama? I need like twenty bucks. Twenty bucks and a place to crash. I'll pay you back. I promise. *(back to the truck as she tightens the lug nuts)* Come on you piece of shit. There we go. Good as new, well good as three hundred miles at least.

She hops in the truck and starts her up.

Act I, Scene 5

Jane is at the table packing her books. Star is perched on the counter, watching her.

STAR: You leaving?

JANE: School.

STAR: You think dad's gonna ground me?

JANE: I don't know. I'm late.

STAR: What should I do?

JANE: Tell him the truth.

STAR: He'd totally freak.

JANE: He already thinks you started a fire at Walmart.

STAR: He wants to put me in a center place.

JANE: No no no. He said the cops came by. Thought they were looking for you.

He's just scared.

STAR: He wants to.

JANE: I'm late.

STAR: Dad wants to put me in a detention center place and you know, you know what happened to Angie, and so dad-

JANE: You know how he is, he just gets a little dramatic, stop fucking around and it will blow over.

STAR: You're not listening. Listen to me, dad wants to put me in a bad center place-

JANE: And what do you want Star? What's your five year plan? Cuz everything you've been doing points to something like that.

STAR: You know what I want? What I really really really a hundred billion times over really want?

For the first time Jane stops getting ready.

JANE: What?

STAR: A family vacation, like we use to do, all of us in the car on the road, all of us together, an adventure.

JANE: Do you remember why we took those vacations?

STAR: For fun.

JANE: No, not for fun, not fun. We couldn't pay rent, we always got evicted, had to throw whatever we could in the camper and move on-

STAR: It was great.

JANE: I'm leaving.

STAR: I'm pregnant.

JANE: I'm late.

STAR: I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant-

JANE: Stop.

STAR: The trouble is the baby is stuck in my Phillip Tubes, this happens, I saw it on TV and now I can feel it for myself in my tummy so-

JANE: Maybe you should go see a doctor.

STAR: I'm going to have to remove it with a vacuum, clean it out, that's what they do.

JANE: So take a pregnancy test.

STAR: They don't know. How can they know?

JANE: It's ninety-nine point eight percent accurate.

STAR: But how do they know?

JANE: Well, the P.H. of your hormones changes and, Jesus, I'm leaving.

STAR: I need to see a doctor.

JANE: Star...

STAR: What?

JANE: (*deep breath*) okay. Do you want me to take you to the doctor?

STAR: Yes.

JANE: When?

STAR: No.

JANE: I'm leaving.

STAR: Don't go, it's lonely here.

JANE: Be good. Don't go out-

Sound of boots on the stairs at the back of the house, a loud knock at the door.

The two girls freeze.

STAR: (*whispering*) it's probably the authorities.

JANE: Shut up.

STAR: They've come for me. I'm pretty sure they've come for me.

JANE: Don't move.

Another loud knock.

JANE: I'll sneak out the back. You stay put.

STAR: Don't tell dad.

JANE: Promise you'll stay put?

STAR: I promise.

Jane tiptoes onto the porch and down the stairs to the exit. Star stands center stage listening. After a beat she picks up a pile of pages and reads the poem on top.

STAR: I'll hitch into town.
Any time I get the itch.
Mom's are always picking me up.
Mom's or men.
Whole cars full of wanting.
Hitch for the itch. Itch for a hitch.
Are you hungry? Are you okay?
Will you touch me? Will you be still?
The forest is different.
Wanting the sun.
Wanting the rain.
Wanting decades.
Waves washing it all away.
In the forest I am almost nothing.

The lights shift.

Act I, Scene 6

One at a time the family comes home and goes about their coming home ritual. Out in the forest Angie gets out of the truck and sets up dinner for herself by the side of the road.

Star finds a story.

STAR: Mom? Dad? I really don't remember anything. Oh, okay, here we go. I got this boost, this clackity clackity high and I went zooming, zooming to the mall.

I thought I would smell all those good mall things like kiwi crusted body lotion or mess of mist day time life spray and I thought I would see some kids from town, but the kids were not friendly, they turned away from me, they-so I just zoomed along my way, zoomed into shiny shiny-

Sarah pulls out boxes and cans and bowls and spoons and sets the table.

SARAH: Dinner! Kids, Dinner.

STAR: Well then out comes Mr. Zippo, my special Zippo, and it's just flick flick flick flick-it's a nervous tick.

SARAH: Bill, you want water?

BILL: I'm having a drink.

SARAH: Fine.

BILL: Can I pour you a drink?

SARAH: A drink drink? No. Jane, get your goddamn books off the table.

STAR: I especially love the smell of gasoline. (*very enthusiastic, she has just hit upon a deep truth about herself*) Yes, yes, this is true, it's true that I love the smell of gasoline-

BILL: No one came by today?

SARAH: Not that I know of.

BILL: No one called?

SARAH: Jane, where's Star?

JANE: What am I, the nanny?

BILL: Little Miss! How was your day?

JANE: Fine.

BILL: School good?

SARAH: Star! Dinner!

JANE: Fine.

BILL: What did you get into?

STAR: So much shiny ruffled brightly colored delicious synthetic party things to put on my body.

SARAH: (*On the porch, getting scared*) Star?!

JANE: Health, Home Ec, Chemistry, Government, Chorus, soccer practice-

STAR: Coming mom.

JANE: You get the check?

SARAH: Leave your father alone.

JANE: I thought you were getting paid today.

BILL: Processing error.

JANE: They said that yesterday.

BILL: So, they're still processing the error.

JANE: Dad! That's totally unethical, they can't do that.

Star enters

STAR: Hello family! Wow. Hello father, hello mother, hello middle sister. I'm so happy you people have all returned to our little home today. All day I was just thinking about you all and it was so nice to think about you all and I realized-

JANE: Chili again?

STAR: And I realized-

JANE: We've been eating chili for a week now-

STAR: Oh mom, I'm only eating pink food to keep up my sun cycles.

SARAH: So put some yogurt in it. It'll be pink.

STAR: Excellent idea mom. You are a genius.

JANE: Sun cycles? Where do you get this shit?

SARAH: Language.

STAR: The natural world we live in.

SARAH: There's biscuits as well.

JANE: Box biscuits.

BILL: Grace guys. Come on.

BILL:	SARAH:	JANE:	STAR:	ANGIE:
A blessing on my hands , my feet, my back, my health, the health of our family and our continued ability to laugh together.	A blessing on my table, on my house on my walls, on finally owning something of my own.	A blessing on my guts and my brains and my tenacity and my drive and stamps, and a stable address and on my college applications .	A blessing on my mom and dad and my sisters and my pets, the ones I killed accidentally like the mice I sent away by balloon.	A blessing on a clean bed, a quiet safe place to sleep and my truck and the luck of strangers and taking what is needed.
A blessing on my father and his father and his father before him and having to raise children in a time that maybe doesn't make sense anymore	A blessing on Star and maybe she does just need to go to school or get into some after school programs or just have friends	A blessing on UCLA and dorm rooms and my own space and maybe just maybe moving on.	A blessing on the trees and the forest and my tummy and my scrapes and I don't know what happened.	A blessing on Star and Jane and I hope their still there and maybe they can give me a little money or a place to crash.
A blessing that we still try to stay together, love together love together.	A blessing that we love together. and that we still try to stay together .	A blessing on Angie out there, and Star, and I miss us all together.	A blessing on Angie and I hope she hears me and comes back so we can be together.	A blessing on finding a place maybe someday where I can settle down and love together.
	Amen		Amen	
		Amen		Amen

Amen

They all bow their heads. Angie says grace beneath them.

And in silence for a time the family eats.

BILL: Star, you think about what I said yesterday?

STAR: Yep.

BILL: Thing is, I get where you're coming from. When I was your age I experimented with drugs and ran up against the authorities, so I get it. But you gotta know being responsible enough to experiment means being responsible for the repercussions.

STAR: I know I know.

BILL: I ever tell you about the healer brothers? Have I told you that one?

STAR: I don't think so.

BILL: Where were we Sarah?

SARAH: Walla Walla Washington Baby.

BILL: That's right. Outside of Walla Walla. And we're staying with these brothers. Healers. Native Americans. Out on a reservation. Strange land. Why were we there?

SARAH: You were trying to write a book.

BILL: I was writing a book! Right. So we've been out there a couple months. Feel like we know these guys. One day we're all driving into town, and all the sudden the older brother, Buz, pulls over and he tell us they have to go away, for a little while but we should pick them up in Walla Walla in a few days. We say okay, think nothing of it, they head off on foot, we keep on going, then the cops pull us over. My dad was a cop, you know that? Cops search the car and sure enough in the back, in the camper, is a pretty serious arsenal of weaponry.

Guns. Turns out our healers are also arms dealers. Now, we have a hell of a time convincing these cops we don't know anything about it, but finally they let us go. We never say anything about meeting the brothers in Walla Walla, trying to protect them. I mean, these are good guys. Few days go by, no sign of the cops, so we head to Walla Walla. We get there, turns out the brothers were shot, both of them, the night before. I couldn't shake it. Kept thinking, you know, had we turned them in would they still be alive? What I'm saying is you can choose your path, but you can't change the scenery.

STAR: Oh totally.

BILL: And as your father, that has to be a line, cross that line and we can no longer help you, and that's hard to do, but you need to know that you are ultimately responsible for your own actions. That's part of growing up.

JANE: Angie crossed that line?

BILL: She certainly did.

JANE: Because she-?

BILL: Look, Angie is an addict. Everything she does is to feed that addiction. We can't protect her from herself.

JANE: Oh.

SARAH: Angie always had a lot of fight in her.

Again they eat.

JANE: May I be excused?

SARAH: You hardly touched your food.

JANE: I'm sick of chili.

SARAH: That's what we have. You need to eat.

JANE: Dad, why don't you just call your boss and like, explain the situation to him, he has to pay you when he agreed to pay you-

BILL: It's not that simple.

JANE: So explain it to me.

SARAH: Leave your father alone.

JANE: We can't be heating up cans of chili for the rest of our lives.

SARAH: We're stretched a little thin right now, you know that.

ALL: Same as always.

JANE: I have homework to do.

SARAH: If you're so concerned with money, why don't you get a job.

JANE: I'm busy.

SARAH: Soccer practice is not busy.

JANE: Extracurriculars are important.

SARAH: Important to you.

JANE: Important to getting into college.

SARAH: We've talked about this, we can't afford to put-

JANE: I'm handling it, I told you. Jeez. May I please be excused?

BILL: Go ahead Jane.

SARAH: No, you need to eat something.

STAR: I remember what happened-

JANE: I'm not hungry.

SARAH: Jane, this is what we have to eat, you will sit down and eat just like the rest of us or-

STAR: Listen, listen, listen to me! I remember what happened, I think.

JANE: Okay, okay. You have our full attention-

SARAH: What happened?

JANE: As usual.

SARAH: Let her speak, Jane.

STAR: uh, so I have this friend Stan, we were at his house, cooking, cooking in the kitchen, heee heee, that's what he calls it, and then we were uh downtown, and I was just zooming around, I went to the Body Shop and Express and the chicken place, and I remember I really wanted, like really really needed this shiny green ruffled tank top, and I was at the shop, with the tank top and I just, I didn't mean to do it, I had the zippo in my hand, I was playing with, you know how much I like the smell of gasoline, and I could smell it, but it didn't connect, like in my head, but then the thingy, the flint did connect in my hand, there was a spark and then whole thing just went up, it was a huge, a big fire. There was screaming and running and sparkling. Maybe I was suffocated by smoke or something, I don't remember what happened after that.

A silence.

BILL: Did this happen?

JANE: You burned down the mall?

STAR: I think so.

BILL: Wait was this the same fire I heard about?

JANE: Did you learn that from the natural world too?

STAR: To be fair it was an accident.

SARAH: Was anyone hurt?

STAR: Who would imagine I could be capable of so much destruction!!

JANE: I call bullshit.

BILL: Was this the fire at Walmart?

STAR: I'm a problem child.

JANE: Come on.

BILL: Star.

JANE: May I please be excused now?

SARAH: We are having a family dinner, you sit down and finish your chili.

JANE: Um, I think your anger is misdirected and I'm going to excuse myself on the grounds that there is a processing error in the way you communicate emotions. Feel free to call me if you have any comments or concerns, I'll be at 1-800- U.R.-CRAZY.

Jane storms out. Bill and Sarah turn to each other.

BILL: I don't know.

SARAH: Let's wait and see.

BILL: If she was a part of that, than this thing is out of our hands.

SARAH: She needs our help.

BILL: It's more help then we can give.

SARAH: We don't know that.

BILL: I think it's pretty clear.

STAR: Maybe I should get a job. I could totally get a job and support the family and I wouldn't have to be grounded or-

SARAH: Eat your chili.

STAR: I mean it, what if I got the most awesome-

BILL: You're grounded that's for sure.

STAR: I knew it.

SARAH: We have a deal Bill, one year, no running from disasters, one year in this house together. The year isn't up.

BILL: This is a, this is a whole different thing...

SARAH: It always is. (*Beat*) we made a deal.

BILL: I'm turning in.

Bill exits.

STAR: What about you mom? If I got all my poems published, like my body of work published in like a big newspaper or got a forever book deal or got on Oprah or something, just like the biggest and the best...would I still be grounded?

Sarah. No Star. If you get published by a really big newspaper and get a book deal and go on Oprah, then no, you wouldn't be grounded.

STAR: I'll start writing tomorrow.

Star jumps up, Sarah begins to clear the table. The lights fade. The sound of the wind in the trees, the crash of waves, moonlight.

Act I, Scene 7

Early predawn light. Bill enters the kitchen and leaves. Sarah enters the kitchen and is frightened by Jane studying at the table.

SARAH: Oh. You're up.

JANE: Got a test.

SARAH: Tomorrow?

JANE: Today now.

SARAH: You got to sleep to girl, same as the rest of us. I don't know how you do it.

(Beat)

SARAH: Well. I'm up now. Gonna make coffee.

She does.

JANE: Someone came by yesterday, for Star.

SARAH: Did you talk to them?

JANE: Nope.

SARAH: You want breakfast? Something nice? I could pull together something nice for us.

JANE: What are you going to do.

SARAH: She's still a child, I mean they can't take her away without our consent.

JANE: She's using-

SARAH: She's a teenager.

JANE: I'm a teenager too.

SARAH: I'll make oatmeal, how bout that?

JANE: I don't have time. Don't you have work?

SARAH: I'll go in late. Stay for breakfast, it'll be nice.

JANE: No. Thanks.

Jane gathers her things together.

SARAH: Don't tell your father.

JANE: I'll be home for dinner.

Jane exits. Sarah throws her coffee cup at the wall.

SARAH: God'damnit.

Star enters.

SARAH: You want oatmeal?

STAR: What's the matter?

SARAH: Oh. I threw my coffee cup at the wall.

STAR: Oh. Yeah, I'll have oatmeal.

SARAH: How you feeling

STAR: I couldn't sleep, just listened to the night, the things I hear at night-

A sound on the back porch. They both grow still and expectant. The knocking begins. Star moves toward the door. Sarah grabs her and holds her back. Star struggles.

SARAH: *(to the melody of Clementine)* Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling shining Star, you are the greatest girl, in the world, shining Star.

During the song the lights shift.

Act I, scene 8

Later. Jane is at the table, she anxiously tears open a letter and reads.

JANE: Our records indicate that your financial aid information is not complete, please turn in two of the following documents: one. Social Security Number. Two.

Star enters nervous and tries to get her attention.

STAR: Jane? How come you never check in with me?

JANE: Hold on a sec.

STAR: Aren't you worried about me?

JANE: No, just busy.

STAR: Want to see my fairy circle? I found one, it's my very own, it's out in the-

JANE: Not today Star.

STAR: I had this dream-

JANE: Knock it off Star.

STAR: There's a man over there!

JANE: Where?

STAR: There's a man over there. There's a man over/

JANE: No/there isn't/

STAR: There. There's a man over-

JANE: Stop it.

STAR: There is in my dream.

JANE: There was in your dream. There isn't now.

STAR: Oh yeah Little Miss Information? You want to bet?

JANE: Yeah, let's bet. Fifty bucks.

STAR: You think you're such hot shit. I know all about you, Jane. You don't believe me? wow! The shit I know about you...I know how you have sex with that surfer at the laundry mat, what's his name? Doing your delicates, I guess. The only chore anyone can get you to agree to-

JANE: Okay Star. You win. You have my complete attention.

STAR: Great. So here's my dream. A picnic together. There is pizza and salad in a box, and little separate containers for dressing and cheese and stuff and all

the sisters are there, not just you, but Angie too before she was kicked out and we can't stop, all of us, can't stop laughing and-

JANE: We did that. Remember? Last summer. Right before Angela left and you started using.

STAR: Well, it happened again in my dream last night.

Boots are heard on the steps. Someone tries to open the door. Star and Jane freeze. From outside we hear.

ANGIE: I hear you in there. Open the door.

The girls remain frozen. The door rattles again. Then with a tremendous kick the door comes in. Angela stands in the porch light, a ghost of her former self, she also has vampire teeth.

ANGIE: What the fuck! Why not just open the door. Jesus.

Star and Jane stare at her in horror.

ANGIE: Oh right.

She spits out the fake teeth.

ANGIE: Scares away the scaries.

STAR: Angie?

ANGIE: I'm home.

The sisters stare at each other.

STAR: You came back for me. Oh my god. I knew you'd come back for me.

ANGIE: baby girl!

STAR: baby girl!

STAR AND ANGIE: Baby girl baby girl baby girl baby girl

Star and Angie do their baby girl dance.

JANE: stop. stop it.

ANGIE: I've been coming around. Trying to catch you guys when they're out, it's always pretty dark-

JANE: They like to keep the place pretty-rustic...

ANGIE: What a shit hole.

JANE: Yeah, it's been getting worse.

ANGIE: How long has it been?

JANE: Eleven month and a half months. Almost a year.

ANGIE: Jesus. But you're all still here.

JANE: Still here.

ANGIE: I bet myself fifty bucks you guys would be gone.

JANE: You lost that one.

STAR: Mom really wants to stay, but dad hates it, he's always thinking of reasons to go, she's always trying to make it nice, but I don't know, maybe we should all just get back on the road, at least then the problems would be about the road, and not about us.

ANGIE: You look like shit Star. You doing meth?

The question hangs in the air.

JANE: She started after you left.

ANGIE: What are you, twelve?

STAR: I'm fourteen and a half, I'll be fifteen in September.

ANGIE: You're worse off than me.

STAR: I know, I really need help.

JANE: She's grounded right now so-

STAR: So I'm not really doing it right now.

JANE: Why'd you come back here Angie?

STAR: You're gonna stay with us now, right?

ANGIE: Star! Meth? That's just about the stupidest, I mean the absolute most senseless fucked up shit you could possibly-

JANE: You're one to talk.

ANGIE: Yeah, and even I, even I can say that meth is absolutely, I mean, I would never ever touch that shit. Star, you're so-

STAR: I know-

ANGIE: Sweet-

STAR: I know-

ANGIE: Small-

STAR: I know-

ANGIE: Little sister-

STAR: I know-

ANGIE: Moon child baby-

STAR: I know-

ANGIE: Not this, don't do this-

STAR: You stay, I'll stop. We can stop together. How bout that deal?

JANE: She can't stay, you know that Star.

STAR: Maybe, maybe we could talk to dad and maybe we could convince him if we were-

JANE: (*To Angie*) You can't stay.

ANGIE: Oh Jane, you haven't changed a bit.

JANE: Clearly you haven't either.

STAR: This is what I've been asking for.

JANE: Why are you back?

ANGIE: I have presents for you guys. Not much. Little things that made me think of you.

She unloads her duffel bag.

ANGIE: For you Star: A postcard of some ducks, some feathers, some stickers.

And for you Little Miss: A brochure on maple syrup production, a T-shirt from New York, some shells from Florida.

JANE: You've been moving around a lot.

ANGIE: You staying on top of your shit?

JANE: School? Yeah.

ANGIE: You got a plan?

JANE: Of course. I've got applications to college out, just waiting to hear back.

ANGIE: Wow, that's a trip huh? Mom will probably flip out if you try to go. You better watch out, I bet they try to stop you too, they'll be like yeah yeah yeah and then like something will come up, some disaster, or maybe just some little thing, some teeny tiny thing that becomes like everything-or what if you don't get in at all, I mean what are you gonna do then?

The question hangs in the air, the sisters glare at each other.

JANE: You can't stay here. Not the way things are right now.

ANGIE: No big deal. I just hit a rough patch. Hey. You got twenty bucks?

JANE: I mean it, I don't know what happened between you and dad but-

ANGIE: God! He totally forced mom's hand, said she had to choose between him or me, how fucked up is that?

JANE: I wasn't there.

ANGIE: I'm telling you.

JANE: Fine, whatever, it scared him bad enough he got a gun.

ANGIE: What? What a fucking drama-

JANE: I haven't seen it.

ANGIE: God, it is always disaster disaster disaster...

JANE: Yeah, so why are you back?

ANGIE: I'm here to help Star.

JANE: I call bullshit.

STAR: No it's true. She's here to help me.

JANE: How? How is she going to help you?

STAR: *(to Angie)* Thanks for the feathers Angie, I'll put them in my forever box.

ANGIE: I'm not gonna make a big thing, I'm camped out in the woods, I can give it a little time. It would be easier to stay away from the house if I had a couple bucks though?

JANE: Are you kidding?

ANGIE: Just a couple bucks...unless you want me to wait til dad gets home.

JANE: Jesus. Fine. I've got two bucks. Here.

She pulls two dollars in change out of her backpack, hands it over.

ANGIE: That's all you got?

JANE: Yes! That's all I got.

STAR: Do you want to play with me outside? I could show you my fairy circle, we can pretend we're sisters.

ANGIE: We are sisters.

JANE: Real sisters, like in a real family, in the real world.

ANGIE: Okay, sure.

STAR: Really? Wow! This is the best day ever.

ANGIE: You gonna come Little Miss?

JANE: I got work.

ANGIE: More power to ya.

JANE: Hey Angie.

ANGIE: Yeah?

JANE: Welcome home.

ANGIE: Thanks.

They share an old smile between them. The lights shift.

Act I, Scene 9

Throughout the following scene the family will come home and go through their own coming home ritual. Jane will turn on her lamp and study. Bill will look for used mobile homes in the local paper. Sarah will try to fix the ever widening crack in their living room. She pours sand and shells and rocks and gravel and wet cement down the crack, we hear it slide through the house and onto the bed of the truck. She cannot fill the crack. Star and Angie are revealed in a warm pool of light.

ANGIE: So this is it?

STAR: Cool, right?

They lean back and look way way up.

STAR: So like the parent tree releases the babies all around them, in a big ring, and as the parent dies, thousands and thousands of years later, the babies grow up in a circle around them, protecting them, but then also using the opening they left behind.

ANGIE: God, they're huge.

STAR: So they are holding each other, you know?

A silence between them.

STAR: We lived in California before, right?

ANGIE: Yeah. We were all born here. Left in eighty-nine.

STAR: Right before the earthquake, right?

ANGIE: We had a dalmatian named Summer and the week before, she started going berserk, dad thought for sure it was a bad sign, so we hit the road.

STAR: He was right.

ANGIE: That time he was right, but then it was like this thing, you know?

STAR: Like dad was our guide.

ANGIE: He had bad feelings about a lot of places after that, but none of them ever panned out. We should have followed Summer, she was the one who knew, but she got hit by a truck outside of Dallas.

STAR: I'm glad you came back.

ANGIE: I don't know how you found me.

STAR: Magic. Me and you, we got to turn our lives around, seize the day, you know, hope and stuff.

ANGIE: Hope?

STAR: I want to make us our own twelve step program and get sober together.

ANGIE: Come on.

STAR: I mean it.

ANGIE: Did Jane put you up to this?

STAR: No way. She's so selfish, she doesn't care what we do, as long as it doesn't get in her way of going to college.

ANGIE: She's a better influence than me.

STAR: She's like a book junky or something.

ANGIE: God, that's true.

STAR: We were supposed to hold each other. Even when we couldn't pay rent, or couldn't find a place for the night, or couldn't do school or whatever, we were supposed to hold each other.

Beat

ANGIE: Totally sober?

STAR: For real.

ANGIE: Does that include cigarettes?

STAR: No.

Beat

ANGIE: Okay.

STAR: Okay?

ANGIE: Okay.

STAR: Yes! Awesome. This is gonna be totally awesome. You'll see. Okay, let's like do a blessing, so we know it's official, and we'll still take it seriously tomorrow.

ANGIE: Okay.

STAR: Okay, so let's get back to back.

ANGIE: Okay.

The sisters get into ritual back to back position. Beat.

ANGIE: Do you want me to say something or-

STAR: (*surprisingly confident voice*) A blessing on sisters who grow in the pattern they were flung, may we hold each other and grow strong in our willingness to go above and beyond this inheritance. A blessing on our perpetual hunger, may it find something more meaningful than drugs and candy to devour. A blessing on forgiveness, may we remake ourselves in whatever likeness we see fit. (*She thinks a moment*) What else?

ANGIE: um, strength.

STAR: Yeah, strength..go ahead Angie.

ANGIE: A blessing on strength. I want to help you.

STAR: And help yourself.

ANGIE: And help myself.

STAR: Good. Oh, Amen.

ANGIE: Amen.

STAR: Great.

ANGIE: That's it?

STAR: Well now we need to work out the details, like the steps-

ANGIE: You've given this some thought huh?

STAR: Yeah. There has to be twelve of them.

ANGIE: Okay.

STAR: So step one is easy. We have to look each other in the eyes and swear we won't do any drugs today.

ANGIE: Okay.

STAR: Step two should be all about breakfast, like we have to eat whatever we want for breakfast so we don't start out our day feeling deprived.

ANGIE: Totally onboard so far.

STAR: Whatever we want.

ANGIE: Whatever we want.

STAR: Step three is like-

Throughout the following the lights will slowly fade and the sound of the ocean and the wind and the trees will take over.

STAR: We either go for a walk, or skinny dip, or climb trees, something fun. Step four-should we write all this down?

ANGIE: I'll remember.

STAR: Step four, I think we should get a pet so we have something besides ourselves to take care of. I sort of want a Chinchilla but maybe a rat isn't so high maintenance.

ANGIE: Oh, I totally want a Chinchilla.

STAR: Step five, we have to get the family to take a vacation together.

ANGIE: Oh boy.

STAR: Step six, mom and dad can't fight.

ANGIE: Maybe we should try to stick to things we can control.

Lights out. The sound of nature.

End of Act I

Act II, scene 1

Dinner.

SARAH: Dinner kids. Dinner! Bill, you want water?

BILL: I'm having a drink.

SARAH: Fine.

BILL: Can I pour you a drink?

SARAH: A drink drink? No. Have you seen the kids?

BILL: I think I heard Star outside, sounded like she was playing.

SARAH: Jane should spend more time playing.

BILL: She is serious huh?

SARAH: I swear she was switched at birth.

BILL: No one came by today?

SARAH: Not that I know of.

BILL: No one called?

SARAH: No. You talk to your boss?

BILL: Yeah, he said not to worry, he would have it to me by the end of the week.

His apologies to the family.

SARAH: We need the money.

BILL: Same as always.

Sarah. Where are they? Kids? Dinner!

Angie and Star can be glimpsed through the trees. Jane calls from her room-

JANE: Coming.

SARAH: Star seems better.

BILL: But arson? And the way she described it, an accident, it's not like she was burning a flag.

SARAH: I know.

BILL: Makes me feel like my dad, believe that?

SARAH: (*Tender*) You're still a ways off, old man.

Jane and Star enter.

BILL: What did you girls get into today?

JANE AND STAR: Nothing.

BILL: You guys play a little?

STAR: We climbed trees and pretended we were all-

JANE: Work good dad?

BILL: It was all right. Been a slow week.

Sarah lays out the bowls and the boxes of leftovers, and they all gather around, but no one says a thing.

Bill. Well, should we say grace?

And they all bow their heads, and Angela is revealed by her truck, and they all say grace.

BILL:	SARAH:	JANE:	STAR:	ANGIE:
A blessing on this family, that I still love so much and may we somehow pull through this one because haven't we always somehow pulled through somehow and things have been a lot worse.	A blessing on this family, may we make it out of this one because yes I still love you but we really need to stop running and stay in one place and thank you for what we do have.	A blessing on please please please let me get out of here sooner rather than later and have some life on my own that is just mine so I can not say grace every night .	A blessing on this family and mostly Angie, who listens to my poetry and and came back to take care of me and if she stays and if they don't turn me in to the police then maybe things will get better.	A blessing on this family which I see now is my family, no matter the short comings and though I travel the whole world I will never escape their world, and let me at least try to help Star.
Because I know things could be better. Amen.	Because I know things could be better. Amen.	Because I know things could be better. Amen.	Because I know things could be better. Amen.	Because I know things could be better. Amen.

A silence as they begin to eat. Jane is worried about something.

JANE: Where's my birth certificate?

SARAH: It might be in the freezer.

BILL: Or in the lockbox.

JANE: Why would it be in the freezer?

SARAH: Safest place for paper documents.

BILL: What if the house burns down.

JANE: Is there a key to the lock box?

BILL: I don't know, maybe in the pantry.

SARAH: I thought I saw it in the glove compartment.

STAR: Guys-

JANE: In the truck?

STAR: Guys, guys, guys-

SARAH: Why do you need your birth certificate?

JANE: What about my social security card?

STAR: Guys, I have an announcement-

SARAH: God, I haven't seen that in ages.

BILL: Well it must be here-

STAR: A major announcement to make.

JANE: Don't you guys keep that stuff? I mean what about the like deed to the house or the car? Receipts for tax purposes and stuff.

STAR: Mom!

SARAH: Yes, sweetheart?

BILL: (to *Jane*) What's this about Little Miss?

STAR: I'm totally starting a twelve step program.

JANE: School stuff.

STAR: I really though about what you guys said and I'm totally gonna turn my life around.

SARAH: That's great.

JANE: People hold onto this stuff for a reason, it's not just some big brother authority thing, it's like where am I from? When were we there? How much did I buy this for? It's important.

BILL: We've told you all our stories.

STAR: I'm starting a twelve step program, so we need to get some new breakfast foods, pink breakfast foods like strawberries or strawberry yogurt or strawberry-Jane. You say I was conceived in an almond grove...I mean do almonds even come in groves? and mom says I was conceived in the back of the Impala, but we never had an Impala. We aren't Impala people...so really who knows, but all I have is you guys to rely on so-

SARAH: Oh Jane.

JANE: Don't "oh Jane" me. I need my birth certificate.

SARAH: You are too smart for your own good.

BILL: What do you remember?

JANE: Your stories.

BILL: So there you are.

JANE: It makes me unreliable.

BILL: It makes you interesting.

JANE: What about the gun?

SARAH: What gun?

JANE: And you're too stupid for your own good.

STAR: Is anybody listening to me?

BILL: I would never use it.

JANE: But is it real?

BILL: I feel better knowing it's there.

JANE: Where, exactly?

BILL: You're missing the point. It's not for you. It's not even really to use. It's there to make me feel better.

SARAH: Did you buy a gun?

BILL: I would never use it, but we've decided to live out here in the woods and we are vulnerable in a way that I feel better knowing that it's there.

JANE: You got that gun after the fight with Angie, because you were scared she was going to try to hurt you-

BILL: She threatened my life.

JANE: She would never actually hurt you, that's just a story you made for her.

Do you see? Angie left because she needed to make a new story for herself.

STAR: She said she left because dad made mom choose between her or the house and mom chose the house.

JANE: Star.

STAR: That's what she said.

JANE: Star.

STAR: Oh, sorry.

BILL: You want me to tell you the truth about when you were conceived?

JANE: That's not the-

BILL: When we realized we were having you we were really scared, we were really broke, living out in a tent, and we could already see how angry and really messed up Angie was, and part of that was on us, absolutely and so we were scared-

JANE: Dad-

BILL: No, let me get this out. And we thought we couldn't keep you, even made an appointment with a doctor, but we couldn't go through with it. You know I started working for the state, surveying, so that we could make having you feel okay. First job I ever held and liked, because I knew what I was doing it for. Felt good and proud. Spent the day out in the sun with my work and come home to Sarah, full as the moon and floating through the apartment. We had a little money, moved into a little place, and when I caught you in my hands, you opened your eyes and looked right at me and smiled. So confident.

JANE: Dad, that's not-

BILL: You've always been that way.

JANE: That's not what I'm asking.

BILL: It's a compliment.

JANE: It's a story, maybe a story for me, maybe a story for you. I just need my birth certificate.

SARAH: Your father is telling you what it was like for us, how much we changed to make this family.

BILL: These are our stories, our wisdom and bullshit, it's what we have to give you, it's your inheritance.

JANE: I just need my birth certificate.

SARAH: Some day you're gonna realize that the facts and the books and the right and wrong answers you fill your head with, are not a substitute for life.

JANE: May I be excused?

SARAH: Yes, you may.

Jane leaves near tears.

BILL: What's got into her?

STAR: You know, she's having a really hard time right now. I'm actually really worried about her.

BILL: And we're really worried about you.

STAR: Dad, don't you listen, I've been trying to tell you. I've started a twelve step program, I'm turning my life around.

BILL: This isn't a game. I think we really need to get you professional help.

SARAH: Which we really can't afford at all right now.

STAR: I mean, I'm already grounded so it's not like your not already punishing me-

BILL: This isn't going to just blow over.

STAR: Nobody listens to me around here. I got help, I'm doing a twelve step program, which you guys should like support me with and say good job.

Star storms out.

SARAH: Is it true about the gun?

BILL: I just got it as a precaution.

SARAH: You didn't tell me.

BILL: I thought I had.

Act II, scene 2

Full moon on the water. Jane has snuck out and is smoking a cigarette on the rocks. Bill joins her. They sit in silence.

BILL: I didn't know you smoke.

JANE: On again off again.

BILL: How was your day today?

JANE: Fine.

BILL: My day was good too, my day was excellent, my boss called and told me to take a paid day off, I spent the afternoon driving, found a diner in half moon bay, ordered a turkey club and a milkshake and just as I realized I didn't have enough money to buy it, the waitress said it was on the house, then I took a long walk on the beach and thought about you kids and how strange you are and how proud I am of you.

JANE: My day was excellent too, I aced my exam, scored a goal in soccer, and everybody cheered for me and lifted me onto their shoulders and we were so happy.

BILL: My day was fantastic. I won the lottery and decided to take us all on a great vacation to Europe to where our ancestors come from and we all had so much fun and didn't worry about anything.

JANE: My day was fantastic too, I got a full scholarship to UCLA and an amazing internship, and we took a road trip together to visit the school and we listened to doo wop in the car and sang and it was great.

(Beat)

BILL: I don't know what to do about Star.

JANE: If I get into college, I'll leave this summer.

BILL: I'm not worried about you.

(Beat)

JANE: No. I know.

BILL: You've always been a fighter, you and Angie, always fighters. Star always just bounced around whatever the rest of the family was into...

JANE: She needs a lot of attention.

BILL: She needs help. That's for sure. Your mother was never good at drawing boundaries. It was the same thing with Angie, same thing, she just let Angie tear apart whatever she wanted and we were constantly picking up the pieces, it wasn't fair or-

JANE: Dad?

BILL: Yes?

JANE: Will you drive to LA with me to go on a college visit?

BILL: I don't know. When?

JANE: In the next month.

BILL: We'll see how it goes.

JANE: We should make a plan.

BILL: Okay, let's play it by ear, we'll need to see where we're at with money and Star and your mother-

JANE: I know, I know. I'm gonna head in.

BILL: Goodnight Jane.

JANE: Goodnight.

BILL: I do want to go. I'm trying to be realistic.

Act II, Scene 3

Bill joins Sarah in the bedroom at the end of a long day.

SARAH: I'm gonna take the weekend and work on the house.

BILL: Paints peeling at the door frames.

SARAH: It's easy enough to scrap off, put up a new paint job when we get some money.

BILL: It isn't a paint issue, it's peeling at the frames cuz the house is moving, the doors hit the frames in a new way-the problem is the foundation-

SARAH: We went over this when we bought the place, you said the foundation is fine-

BILL: I said I thought it was fine, but you should probably get an appraisal.

SARAH: But you didn't want to spend any extra money.

BILL: You had already made up your mind.

(beat)

BILL: There's a winnebago for sale. Saw it on Ocean street. Good condition.

Used but really well taken care of. Couple of retired teachers I think. Nice people. Got me thinking. You know-

SARAH: Bill-

BILL: No, hear me out. Fix it up. We could put some money into it. Make it the way you want it. Then we could travel again-sleep out under the stars, find those

little towns, Ukia, Arcadia, Coos Bay...remember Coos Bay? Remember that diner?

SARAH: Bill.

BILL: Get Star out of here. Get her someplace else. Take her to the desert, Joshua tree, a healing place. Give her some serious attention. There's something dark about this town. You notice that?

SARAH: No Bill, no. We agreed on a year.

BILL: It's not working out here Sarah. It's not.

SARAH: I wanted to use Aunt Suzie's money for something permanent. I want a place to settle down.

BILL: This place is falling apart.

SARAH: and I want to fix it. I want you to help me.

BILL: Okay, okay, okay. It's a deal.

Beat

BILL: She scares me. She's so far away and she scares me.

SARAH: I wish I could hold her again, like she was a baby, make my body make it okay.

BILL: Maybe we can't help.

SARAH: Of course we can. She's still here. As long as she's here, we can help.

BILL: I don't recognize her, her face has gotten funny.

SARAH: I don't know.

BILL: How long has it been?

SARAH: Not quite a year.

BILL: How long exactly?

SARAH: Help me with the house this weekend.

BILL: Feels like forever.

SARAH: Your not even trying.

(Beat)

BILL: Fine. I'm gonna hit the hay.

SARAH: Sure.

Bill turns out the light. Sarah smokes in the dark.

SARAH: Bill?

BILL: Yeah?

SARAH: Where's the gun?

BILL: In the drawer, in the table, next to the couch, last I checked.

SARAH: Goodnight.

BILL: Goodnight.

Act II, scene 4

Moonlight through the trees. Jane approaches Angie by the truck.

JANE: Hey.

ANGIE: Hey. Thanks for coming out.

JANE: Yep.

ANGIE: I need you to do something for me.

JANE: I figured.

ANGIE: It's not like that.

JANE: Right. You know, you couldn't have picked a better time to come back.

ANGIE: It's not like that.

JANE: It's a total coincidence right? Years almost up, dad's half way packed already, mom's bearing down, Star is, I don't know, destroying everything she can get her hands on, mostly just herself, and just incase there was even a glimmer of hope we were gonna make some logical smart well informed family whatever-Enter Angie.

ANGIE: You're cold.

JANE: Reasonable.

ANGIE: Selfish.

JANE: Smart. Just wait another month. One more month. Let's see how it all shakes out and then get back in touch.

ANGIE: Shakes out? That's your term for all this?

JANE: It's the same shit.

ANGIE: Come here. I need to show you something.

Out of the truck she pulls a giant box, it's opened at the top and spilling out are thousands of bits and scraps and pieces of paper.

JANE: Is this all Stars?

ANGIE: I'm in Boulder, or Wichita or Salt Lake-I don't know-I've been there a couple weeks. I got a job bagging groceries, I got an address, I am giving the place a fucking solid gold try. But you know, I'm still with you guys, in my head, I'm still saying grace. So one night, I'm laying out my little can dinner, I'm in a Motel Six, got a little one chair table, and the phone rings. I don't even know what it is at first. I get it, it's the front desk girl and she says there is a package for me, which is crazy, I mean couldn't be right. How could anyone find me here? So I step outside and there's one of those UPS guys, like brown creased suit guys, across the parking lot, walking straight forward, walking straight towards me, walking looking straight at me, and he's got this box, cradled like a baby or a body and I know, I just know- it's Star. *(She picks up a page)* It is her whole life in writing. *(Real simple)* She needs help. *(Beat)* I need you to help.

JANE: Okay.

Angie then pulls another box out of the truck, this one is small and shiny and black.

ANGIE: You need to get rid of this for me.

Jane opens it and peers inside. Her face goes white.

JANE: Oh.

ANGIE: You have to get rid of it.

JANE: Okay.

ANGIE: Promise.

JANE: Promise.

ANGIE: No matter what I say later.

JANE: Okay.

ANGIE: Tonight.

JANE: Okay. Just Angie?

ANGIE: Yeah?

JANE: Stay out of the house for now.

ANGIE: Yep.

Act II, scene 5

Star in the kitchen looking for ingredients.

STAR: Mom. Mom! Mom!!!

SARAH: I'm right here, what?

STAR: Do we have frozen raspberries or strawberries or any kind of frozen berries at all?

SARAH: No.

STAR: Well what about fruits?

SARAH: There's a banana in the crisper.

STAR: The crisper?

SARAH: Drawer on the bottom.

STAR: Oh. (*New thought*) Mom! Do we have any flour or salt or sugar or baking soda or baking powder or pancake mix or pancakes?

SARAH: What is going on Star?

STAR: I need to make pancakes this morning.

SARAH: There's some flour, but no eggs. I can make you some oatmeal.

STAR: Mom, I need a good breakfast so I don't feel deprived.

SARAH: I'll put a banana in your oatmeal, and some extra sugar, you won't feel deprived, I promise.

STAR: Okay. Yeah, I guess that will be okay.

SARAH: You gonna help me work on the house this weekend?

STAR: Oh yeah, for sure, that will take care of like three steps at once I think.

SARAH: Slow down sweetheart.

STAR: I feel great. Can we go to the pet store today?

SARAH: Absolutely not.

STAR: But mom! It's part of my plan and I-

SARAH: You know you can't.

STAR: It's for the greater good.

SARAH: Give me a break today, will you?

STAR: I have money and I'll totally take care of them-

SARAH: No Star, no. Knock it off.

STAR: Angie said I could.

SARAH: What?

STAR: Angie said she would help me.

SARAH: She's back?

STAR: Oh. I don't know. Maybe. I'm gonna organize my forever box.

Star bounces out of the room. Sarah opens her arms.

SARAH: Oh please, let my girl be back.

Act II, Scene 6

Bill, Sarah, Star and Jane are finishing up dinner. Jane is holding a single piece of paper in her hand, she folds it and unfolds it.

JANE: Letter came today.

STAR: From college?

BILL: Oh my god.

STAR: What does it say?

Bill. Are you in?

SARAH: Are you going?

JANE: *(Reading the letter)* Congratulations! It is our great pleasure to offer you admission to The University of California, Los Angeles for the fall quarter 1999. You have been admitted to The College of Letters and Science with chemistry and biochemistry as your academic major.

BILL: Holy shit Jane!

STAR: You did it.

JANE: I'm going. I got in.

STAR: I'm totally gonna visit you like all the time.

BILL: That's amazing.

SARAH: That's incredible Jane. You need to start to think about how you are gonna pay for it all-

JANE: I know.

SARAH: It's no small thing. Paying your way and going to college.

JANE: I know.

SARAH: And we aren't in any position to help you right now.

JANE: I know that.

SARAH: I just don't want to get carried away before you deal with-

JANE: I've already applied for scholarships and I can get a job or take out loans. Whatever I need to do.

SARAH: I just want you to be realistic about this.

JANE: Mom. Look at me.

SARAH: I know.

JANE: I'm realistic.

SARAH: I know.

JANE: I'm leaving.

SARAH: I know sweetheart.

JANE: I'm finished, I'll be in my room.

SARAH: Okay.

STAR: Can I be excused too?

SARAH: Fine.

Star follows Jane out, Bill see's Sarah for the first time in a long time.

BILL: You okay?

SARAH: Oh, I'm fine.

BILL: You don't want her to go.

SARAH: It seems impossible.

BILL: It's pretty astonishing.

SARAH: I don't know how to help her.

BILL: Same way you help Star.

SARAH: Or Angie?

BILL: Or Angie.

SARAH: I want her back. I want Angie back here with us.

BILL: She'd tear this house apart in a week. You don't want that.

Silence.

SARAH: When was the last time you went to work?

BILL: Went today.

SARAH: Bill. When was the last time you went to work?

BILL: Been three weeks now.

SARAH: And when are we gonna take care of the bills?

BILL: I don't know Sarah.

SARAH: You're not holding up your end of the bargain.

BILL: I hate this god'damn house, came home yesterday and the hinges on the front door were all bent out of place, looked like someone kicked the door in. Did someone kick the door in?

SARAH: No.

BILL: Now I can't open the front door without thinking the whole thing will come crashing down on me.

SARAH: It's on my list for Saturday.

BILL: It's a bigger problem than the hinges.

SARAH: We'll fix it on Saturday.

Act II, scene 7

Lights shift. Bill joins Jane on the beach.

BILL: I'm proud of you.

JANE: Thanks.

(Beat)

JANE: You okay?

BILL: I haven't been going to work.

JANE: I figured, you been gone, I mean, you've been here but-

BILL: I wasn't fired. Stick it out with the state, I could have gotten some kind of retirement. I don't know. I can't explain it to you.

JANE: Mom wants to stay here.

BILL: She's staying. That's certain. *(Beat)* I got a question for you.

JANE: Shoot.

BILL: What are your top five favorite doowop songs for singing while driving on the highway.

JANE: Oh. Good question. ummm number one “get a job”.

BILL: Oh yeah?

JANE: I don’t mean that in a snotty way.

BILL: I know, it’s a good song.

JANE: Probably “Lollipop” it’s cheesy but really fun to sing.

BILL: Good.

JANE: “Why do fools fall in love?”

BILL: You got it.

JANE: Definitely “Rubber Biscuit” has to be on there.

BILL: (*Singing*) “did you ever hear of a wish sandwich? Well it’s a kind of a sandwich where you take two slices of bread, and wish you had some meat”

JANE AND BILL: Do-do-doo-do-bum.

BILL: That one’s fun. What else?

JANE: “In the still of the night”

BILL: That’s my favorite. I’ll take you down to school, take you down, do a tour, bring you back.

JANE: Oh, I, I know it’s not a good time.

BILL: Jane-

JANE: I could take the bus, or borrow the truck...

BILL: Let me do this thing...

JANE: (*Realizing*) Oh. And then?

BILL: And then I don't know. But I want to try and help you.

JANE: Okay.

BILL: It'll be fun.

Act II, scene 8

Full light. Sarah is cleaning. The house is empty. Angie knocks on the door.

Sarah freezes, Angie pushes the door open.

SARAH: Angie?

ANGIE: Mom.

SARAH: You're back.

ANGIE: I've come back.

SARAH: You look horrible sweetheart.

ANGIE: I don't feel so good.

SARAH: I've been thinking about you.

ANGIE: I still say grace, mom.

SARAH: Where have you been?

ANGIE: All over, but I would still say grace and fight with dad and pull on you and tease Jane and all in my head but still, I left but everything stayed the same, shit, I feel bad, I feel real bad-

SARAH: Can I make you some chili?

ANGIE: Yeah.

SARAH: You look terrible.

ANGIE: I want to rest for a little bit.

SARAH: It's a little tough here right now, I'll have to talk to your father about-

ANGIE: I'm not gonna make any trouble, look at me. I'm not much of a threat. I just want to be with you guys for a few days till I feel better. Maybe I could talk to him?

SARAH: Maybe it's best if you give me a chance to talk to him. We could set you up in town for a few days...somehow, and I'll try to smooth things over and then-

ANGIE: Ma. I'm real sick. Look at me.

(Beat)

SARAH: I'll get you blankets for a bed.

ANGIE: I heard about Star. She gonna get arrested or something?

SARAH: No. It'll blow over.

ANGIE: You let her walk all over you, you know that right?

SARAH: Yes, I know that. I'm also making you a bed.

ANGIE: I know mom, you can't help it. I remember when I was little and I knew if I could get you into a pet store, if I could just get you in the door, I could have any pet I wanted, rabbits or hamsters or whatever. You've always been like that.

Sarah stops, a pile of blankets in her arms.

SARAH: You're not too sick to make a bed, I hope.

ANGIE: Oh, yeah. Sure.

SARAH: I'm gonna have a smoke.

ANGIE: Sure.

Sarah grabs cigarettes and smokes, she watches Angie intently.

SARAH: You were always smarter than me Angie. You always had an angle to everything. It use to frighten me. Mom was institutionalized when I was ten, I raised those two, my brothers, by myself. Had you when I was nineteen, Jane when I was twenty-four and Star when I was twenty-eight. I've been making lunches my whole life. Never even thought of asking for anything in return.

ANGIE: And maybe you should have.

SARAH: Maybe so.

ANGIE: Star asked me to stay.

SARAH: She can't see the whole picture.

ANGIE: I think I can help her.

SARAH: You and Bill tearing each other apart isn't going to help her.

ANGIE: I want to help her. No angle here.

SARAH: Then give me a little time to talk to Bill.

ANGIE: Fine. Can I take the blankets out to my truck?

SARAH: Yeah.

Act II, scene 9

Early early morning light. Star bounces into the living room carrying something covered in cloth.

STAR: Guys! Guys! Guys! Guys! Come out here. I have a surprise. The best surprise ever! Come out here!

She puts something on the table and bounces around. The family gathers.

JANE: Jesus, what time is it?

SARAH: Earl early-

BILL: Morning guys.

SARAH: Morning-

JANE: Morning.

STAR: Morning morning morning.

SARAH: What's this about Star?

STAR: Tada!!!

She pulls back the cloth to reveal a big beautiful bowl full of strawberries. (sorry guys)

STAR: I found them. A whole field of them. They're like the sweetest pinkest best breakfast food ever. I was working on my steps and then I realized, if I picked a pile of them we could have strawberry breakfast together. To celebrate.

SARAH: These are beautiful.

JANE: Wow.

Bill eats one.

BILL: Hot damn.

Sarah and Jane eat.

SARAH: Oh my god.

JANE: So good.

STAR: This is the best step ever!

JANE: Thanks Star.

BILL: Yeah. Thanks Star.

STAR: Yay!

SARAH: Guess what guys? It's work on the house day.

BILL: I'll look at the door.

STAR: What can I do?

JANE: I call laundry.

Jane leaves to get the laundry.

STAR: What can I do?

SARAH: (referring to the crack) I just don't know what I'm gonna do about this thing.

STAR: Mom, mom, mom, mom, mom-

SARAH: What?

STAR: I've got some ideas about that crack, you know, like ways we could make the crack helpful, for example we could hide our documents down there, you know, all those important documents. Or we could make it into a thing, like a time capsule or a clock or a secret or...what if, what if we put a quarter down there, and lit a candle and called it church, it could our family church. God, I need church. That should be one of the twelve steps. Fill it up with all the bad stuff and then seal it up tight so we know for sure the bad stuff is gone. It's funny that crack, it's a funny crack. It's a thing filled with nothings, it's an absence-that crack, like the place in my tummy that is always hungry and god I'm so hungry, all the time-

SARAH: Slow down baby, you're making me nuts.

STAR: We should totally paint the house green with red trim like matching the trees.

JANE: I'm doing laundry.

STAR: Or black and blue like the sea.

SARAH: You get the towels under the sink?

JANE: Yep. And the mountain of dirty clothes under Star's bed.

SARAH: You need a hand carrying all that?

JANE: I got it mom.

STAR: Have fun at the laundromat.

Star humps a chair.

JANE: Fuck off.

BILL: You check all the pockets in the pants?

JANE: Yep. Nothing. Bye.

BILL: See ya.

STAR: We could do a mural, like the whole family painted on the outside while we're living on the in.

SARAH: Any luck with that door?

BILL: It's a piece of shit.

STAR: Like inside outside.

SARAH: So you fixed it?

BILL: Yep.

STAR: Or we could each get a wall and paint whatever we wanted.

SARAH: I think this thing has gotten bigger.

BILL: The grand canyon in our dining room.

STAR: Lemme see.

Star gets down on the floor with Sarah.

STAR: Dare me to stick my hand in there?

She does.

SARAH: Knock it off. I can't get anything to stick in place down there.

STAR: How bout my whole arm?

SARAH: Just falls right through.

Star sticks her whole arms down the crack.

STAR: Ah, ah, help, I'm getting pulled down something terrible, mom help!

SARAH: Come on, you.

Sarah grabs Star and pulls her up. Star mock falls into her arms.

STAR: You've saved my life forever mom!

BILL: What we need is a new foundation.

SARAH: Put in a new foundation the whole place could shift, we'll be paying for it for the rest of our lives.

BILL: We can't afford paint either.

STAR: I have paint, I totally have some finger paints left over, I'll fix it, I'll fix it right now.

BILL: Star!

STAR: I'll just grab em from my-

BILL: Star.

STAR: What?

BILL: Slow down a second honey.

STAR: I could go into town and pick out real paints if you want.

BILL: You're still grounded.

STAR: You don't have to worry about me any more dad. I promise.

SARAH: You can use finger paints if you want. That's fine.

STAR: This is the best family day ever!!!

She goes to get the paints.

BILL: Sarah.

SARAH: What?

BILL: She can't cover the walls with finger paint.

SARAH: What difference does it make? We'll have to paint over it anyway, and it makes her happy, let her do it.

BILL: She's not better.

SARAH: Seems better to me.

BILL: She'll be bouncing off the walls, till she's crashing through the windows.

SARAH: This is different. Trust me.

Bill suddenly stops, stands and looks around.

BILL: Is Angie back?

SARAH: Maybe we have some old paint in the pantry, probably be better than finger paint.

BILL: Sarah. Is Angie back?

SARAH: She's sick. She misses us. She asked me to talk to you, she really needs-

BILL: Needs a lot of things, I know, none of them things we can give her.

SARAH: She's my daughter-

BILL: She's an addict, we've been through this. *(Beat)* What are we doing here?

We said one year, the year is up.

SARAH: I was waiting to sit down and talk about it.

BILL: No. Not like this.

SARAH: Angie is my daughter, I need to be able to take care of her.

Bill walks a slow circle and leaves.

Act II, scene 11

Early morning light. Angie climbs slowly up the steps to the house. She is really sick, quaking and trying not to vomit.

ANGIE: Mom? Mom!

Sarah comes out onto the steps.

SARAH: That you Angie?

ANGIE: I need....I need...I need...

SARAH: Star! Help me with your sister.

Star comes out of the house. They run down the steps and help Angie inside.

ANGIE: I need to get out of that forest, there are some intense fucking trees in that forest, they were like pressing down on me, making a fucking Angie Panini for breakfast.

SARAH: There now. You're freezing, we'll wrap you up. Do you want some tea or hot milk or-

ANGIE: Chocolate milk or tea and honey something sweet-

SARAH: Hot chocolate?

ANGIE: Fine.

Sarah goes to get more blankets and make hot chocolate.

STAR: You okay?

ANGIE: I'll be fine sugar plum.

STAR: You sure? You look like shit.

ANGIE: You too. Just the shakes, couple days, it'll pass, don't worry.

STAR: Did you do your twelve steps today?

ANGIE: Working on them right now.

STAR: If you are, I am too.

ANGIE: Maybe we get a pet today, get mom to the store-

STAR: It's so hard to have twelve steps and be grounded.

ANGIE: Let's just work on the small stuff now. Did you have breakfast?

STAR: Totally. I saw someone do this on TV and they like had to confront someone from their past, and then apologize to them and then forgive them.

ANGIE: We only have us in our past.

STAR: I know.

ANGIE: That seems really hard.

STAR: I know.

ANGIE: Let's just get through this, then we can work out the other stuff.

Bill enters and seeing Angie on the couch he freezes. Angie rises. They face each other.

BILL: You kick in this door?

Angie glowers

BILL: Let me ask you, was it the first thing you did when you got home? What are you planning on wrecking next? How bout the windows? What about the roof? This house is the world to your mom, you know that. Did you come back to destroy it, or did you have something else on your mind?

ANGIE: Hi dad.

BILL: Angie.

ANGIE: I'm sick.

BILL: Go to a doctor.

ANGIE: That's not the family way.

BILL: It's always something with you, isn't it?

ANGIE: I still say grace.

BILL: So do I, every night, with my family.

ANGIE:

you are such an unbelievable-

you don't get it. I left, I was gone, I get on the road and I'm still saying grace. I stub my toe or someone looks at me funny, I gotta get out of town, I suddenly gotta run- Why do I do that dad?

Oh here we go, here we go

You gonna blame someone else, cuz you didn't sire me, just raise your hands up when I can't get a real job or stop running or...

BILL:

get out of here, don't you start that with me

You are a grown woman Angie don't try to pin me with that. You gotta a hateful heart Angie, I don't know where you get that from-

I took you into my heart, like you were my own, walked you and rocked you and kept us all close

Selfish, always so selfish

ANGIE: (CONT.)

like you aren't, you been playing house here with mom when we all know you'd rather be on the road, you should spare us and fucking leave

BILL: (CONT.)

I will not let you push this family around any longer, I will not let you control our lives any longer.

BILL: Stay in this house a minute longer I will treat you like a common criminal.

ANGIE: Mom said I could stay. Maybe it's your turn to leave.

BILL: Not your decision. You have to the count of five.

Bill counts and goes for the gun.

BILL: One. Two. Three.

The gun is gone. Sarah enters. She's got the gun in her hands, an old 22. She points it down but her arm is steady.

SARAH: Not like this you two. Not in my house.

BILL: You have it.

SARAH: We are not starting over here.

Jane enters.

JANE: What is-oh.

BILL: Girls. Go to your rooms. Angie is leaving.

JANE: Angie-

STAR: No, Angie has to stay.

JANE: I asked you to wait.

STAR: I need her here, I need-

ANGIE: She's a meth head, can't you see her? Six months she's fucking getting high, flying through this house, you don't see that?

BILL: No no no, this isn't about Star this is about you coming back here to destroy-

ANGIE: She asked me to come, to stay-

SARAH: She's staying.

BILL: This is between you and I Sarah, let's talk this through on our own.

SARAH: It's not a conversation with you. I'm not leaving.

BILL: Put the gun down.

Angie begins to vomit.

ANGIE: I need, I need, I need...

JANE: We need to take Angie to the hospital-

SARAH: No hospitals. We stay put.

JANE: She's trying to clean up, we have to take her in.

ANGIE: Please.

STAR: She wants to help, she's here for me, to help me, cuz I need-

Angie falls.

JANE: Pick her up dad, we have to take her in.

SARAH; You won't come back, she won't come back.

STAR: Pick her up dad!

Bill looks at them.

STAR: We were supposed to pick each other up, after the quake we were supposed to hold each other. That's what we do.

JANE: Dad!

BILL: My god it is always just disaster, disaster, disaster....

He picks up Angie like baby.

JANE: (*To Star*) stay and watch mom.

STAR: I want to be with Angie.

JANE: You help mom now.

Bill, Jane and Angie leave. Sarah realizes she's holding the gun, she sets it on the table and sits down. Star watches her.

SARAH: Sometimes when I pass a window I see my mother reflected back,
sometimes when I talk to strangers I hear my mother's nervous laugh.

Everything I am I teach my children, whether I like it or not.

STAR: It's okay mom, look at me.

SARAH: Maybe it isn't enough.

STAR: Angie's doing this to get better. She's doing it for me and for her.

SARAH: My mom wrote poetry on everything, receipts, envelopes, frosty windows, walls, bills, her hands, legal pads, post its, matchbooks, napkins, she died in that hospital, nobody told us, must have been weeks, they just shipped along her boxes, nothing in them but her poems, it was all she had left. I still have them.

STAR: Oh.

SARAH: You write just like her.

End of

Act II

Act III, Scene 1

In the night. Star is whispering, crouched down, looking for something. Maybe in her forever box.

STAR: Tiny tiny bits. Tiny tiny tiny bits. Oh God. A teeny weeny little bit. I don't feel good. I don't feel so good. My brains all buzzz. buzzz. Where is it? Where the fuck is it? Just a little bit, right here, swear to God. fuckers.

Nothing is there.

It's okay. It's okay, it's okay, it's okay. If I was a buddha I would meditate. If I was a list person I would bullet point this shit. If I was a tree I would leaf right now. I'd be fucking leafing. Oh God. Be brave. be brave. be brave....

She sings a song that makes her feel brave, maybe the Violent Femmes Kiss off.

STAR: You can all just kiss off into the air/ behind my back I can feel them stare/ they hurt me bad but I don't mind, they hurt me bad they do it all the time yeah yeah....yeah yeah....

She stops.

Stupid. So stupid. Be brave.

Act III, Scene 2

Ten days later. Sarah sets the table for dinner. Fixing the house has only made it worse, half finished projects litter the table, counters and floor. Jane has been looking for her birth certificate and has pulled all the drawers open and dumped out the contents.

SARAH: Dinner, guys. Dinner.

The family gathers except Angie who remains on the porch. Jane's hands are filled with papers.

JANE: Not in the freezer, not in the glove compartment, not in the pantry-

SARAH: Bill, you want water?

STAR: (*To Jane*) I could make you a new one. I have really good hand writing.

BILL: No, I'm having a drink.

SARAH: Fine.

JANE: This isn't some bullshit fun game like finger painting the walls. I need my birth certificate before we go.

BILL: You want a drink?

SARAH: Yeah, I'll have that drink now.

Bill pours them both a drink.

STAR: Oooh little miss information is getting pissy.

BILL: You know what day it is today?

SARAH: Kids dinner.

BILL: The year is up Sarah.

SARAH: We'll talk about it. Cheers.

BILL: Cheers. You packed little miss?

JANE: Everything but the paperwork.

BILL: It doesn't make any sense to stay here. The house is falling apart. Jane's leaving, Star's not in school. Who knows what Angie's planning.

JANE: Some day you are gonna wake up and realize you can't just make shit up for attention, some day you are actually gonna have to do something.

STAR: I do stuff. I do stuff all the time.

JANE: Oh really? What?

SARAH: Jane. Knock it off.

BILL: Give your sister a little space.

JANE: I stopped by the Walmart yesterday. It didn't happen. None of it happened, the fire, the authorities, none of it.

STAR: Yeah it did. I made it happen.

JANE (*To Star*) You didn't do shit. (*To Sarah*) I told you so.

BILL: Is that true, Star?

JANE: Ask around. See for yourself.

SARAH: It doesn't matter, let's just say grace and have dinner.

JANE: Mom, are you listening to me?

SARAH: I am, I am.

JANE: It was all make believe. A totally made up disaster so we would all get together and take care of her. Do you recognize a pattern here?

SARAH: (*To Jane*) How is it you're so smart and know so little? Look at her. Just look at her. She is on fire, she is in trouble, she needs our attention. It's not so much to ask.

JANE: Unbelievable. And I need my birth certificate, before we leave for LA.

SARAH: Angie! Dinner!

ANGIE: (*From the porch*) Coming!

Angie enters. She looks better.

ANGIE: I got rid of the gun.

BILL: What? I asked Sarah to-

ANGIE: It was under the couch.

BILL: That was not your decision to-

STAR: Please stop fighting you guys.

ANGIE: Why the fuck would you leave a gun under the couch.

BILL: Sarah, I asked you to hold onto that.

ANGIE: Totally stupid.

SARAH: I put it back.

STAR: Guys, guys, guys, I have a great idea-

BILL: You behave like a child, so they walk all over you.

ANGIE: We're supposed to go the pet store tomorrow too.

SARAH: (*To everyone*) come on.

BILL: There have got to be some boundaries.

STAR: The best, like the greatest, like the best-

JANE: Shut up Star.

ANGIE: I can't believe you guys still have this fight.

BILL: Sarah, I don't want to stay here. I want to leave, I want you to come with me.

SARAH: I know babe, that's very clear. And I want to fix the house, I want to have all my girls under one roof, I want you to go to work, I want Star to be healthy and Jane to be happy and Angie to not be mad. But mostly, mostly I want to know what it is like after a big storm.

BILL: I can't make all that for you.

SARAH: I'm not asking you to make it for me, I'm asking you to help me try.

BILL: I can't.

STAR: Please don't fight guys.

SARAH: This is twenty four years of marriage Bill, this is a family crisscrossing the country trying to keep up with you, this is my arms and my back and my heart and my whole life right here. You try! You try really hard right now.

Quietly Star slips out the back.

BILL: Sarah-

SARAH: If you can't try than my whole life, the whole thing is meaningless.

Silence.

BILL: I can't do it anymore. I'm sorry.

Silence.

SARAH: Grace guys, come on.

And like a force of nature Bill, Sarah, Angie and Jane gather at the table. They bow their heads. Throughout the grace we see the flicker of Star's zippo on and off, at the base of the stairs, a small blue flame.

BILL:	SARAH:	JANE:	ANGIE:
A blessing on trying and trying and I need to get out of here because this house, this forest, the whole fucking place forever just and maybe I'm not meant to stay maybe they would be better without	A blessing on we are staying in this house, I cannot keep doing this to myself, to these girls, we need to stop fucking running from everything all the time, there needs to be some other way of doing this and where's Star? Wait stop. Where is Star?	A blessing on please please please let me get out of here this summer, I can't stay through any more of this, I will be so much better on my own and there is no way i will keep up these stupid patterns	A blessing on Star, I hope she can pull through this one and god may I be strong enough to get over this and have some kind of a normal healthy life, maybe somewhere else someday maybe

Flash of blue light. Star illuminated on her hands and knees on the rocks, panting really fast.

STAR: Hands curled around the bowl around the menus around the pipe around the toilet around the (*A heartbeat speeding up*) stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile stan smile-
smile-

A great crash as something large falls through the forest canopy and hits the living room with a thud. It is Star's box of poems, papers fly everywhere.

Act III, Scene 3

The light of a heart monitor accompanied by it's steady beep. We can barely make out a white bed, a person in that bed.

STAR: Fifteen year old Star Davies arrived at St. Vincent's Emergency department at 9:42 pm on May 4th, 1999. Initial evaluation noted the following symptoms: Star's pupils were dilated, her temperature was extremely high, and her blood pressure was abnormally high. Doctors ordered fluids be given to rehydrate her. The doctor than stimulated the contraction of the blood vessels with a machine to decrease blood pressure. At 10:15pm she suffered from a heart attack, doctors were able to revive her, and the patient entered a coma.

As the lights come up we see Sarah sitting on the floor sifting through Star's poems. She stops and begins to read one of the pages out loud.

Through the following, lights will slowly come up on Angie hovering over Sarah at the table. Jane and Bill are driving East on 17.

SARAH: (*Reading to the audience*) The filter and spin of light and leaves. The long black, strong back spine of the forest always behind us, behind us, pressing. Down the wide brimful days, sunlight pouring through leaves, dappled our porch, shaded our lives, shade giving way to shadows, the fog. Look out at the sea and see, that big black dog the ocean, always lapping hungry, grinding the rock, wearing us down.

She stops. Looks up at Angie.

SARAH: Three girls; a beginning, middle and end. Star was the sweetest, and even as a child she was a poet, even when she was nine, she writes like Ginsberg, surprising-

She forgets what she's doing. Angie helps her.

ANGIE: I guess we should have dinner. Yeah. I can do this, got on at it on the road.

Angie starts to pull together dinner.

ANGIE: Mom, you want dinner?

SARAH: Oh. Kids? Dinner!

ANGIE: I'm here. Sarah...you want water?

Sarah takes over fixing dinner.

SARAH: Yes, water...can I get you water?

ANGIE: No I'm having a drink.

Sarah: Fine.

ANGIE: Can I pour you a drink?

SARAH: A drink drink? No.

ANGIE: Check come?

SARAH: Leave your father alone.

BILL: You want to stop for dinner?

JANE: Let's just keep driving.

They begin to sing In the Still of the Night together.

ANGIE: Maybe I could get a job, over the summer, if you think it would help, until this is past-

Sarah loses her place

SARAH: Kids? Kids? Is it dinner?

Angie leads her to the table.

ANGIE: It's okay, I'm here, come on guys, grace-

Bill and Jane in the car, Sarah and Angie at the table all take a collective breath together. Star appears in a circle of light.

STAR: A blessing on the small things. My recovery. The trip to the store, standing in line with other humans standing in line to buy things. A blessing on my daily shower which is hot and lets me be alone. A blessing on that old tabby cat I saw in the street yesterday, who actually held my eye as I walked by. A blessing on walking. A blessing on my socks, my shoes, my underwear and sweatshirt, extra layers of skin for extra protection. A blessing on those that stayed behind.

Hello. I love you. Stay together. Stay close.

Lights out.

The end.

still now

a play by Katie Bender

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Synopses

After witnessing the fall of the twin towers, Annie heads to Japan to study Butoh, looking for a dance form that expresses the destruction she can't comprehend.

Ten years later, Annie is diagnosed with stage four cancer and returns to Butoh to prepare for her final dance. *Still Now* confronts us with the accelerated motion of a woman learning and losing her body, accompanied by the doctors, teachers, friends and lovers that become her partners in movement, to ask the question: what can our bodies teach us that our minds cannot fathom?

Characters

Annie

Ben

Amagatsu

Dr. Beltram

Kaytlin

Annie too

Nurse(s)

Dr. Drexler

Location

The hospital, the dance studio, the apartment, the bar, the emergency room, the bridge.

Author's note

Ten years are to be traversed in this play which represents the accelerated motion of Annie learning and losing her body. The actors that make up the scenes also make up the world of the play and their constant presence on stage, their bodies in motion, frame the passing of time, the place of action and the arc of the story. Butoh dance of darkness is not only how Annie dances but how the play as a whole dances. *Still Now* owes a great debt to the Noh principles established by Zeami Motokiyo, the plays of Thornton Wilder, Paula Vogel and the dances of Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata.

*A sterile doctors clinic, bright September sunlight
glaring through the window. Annie sits on the patient table,
trying not to panic. Doctor Drexler listens to her breathing.*

DREXLER

Probably just a cold-

ANNIE

It's been six months.

DREXLER

You seem strong and healthy-

ANNIE

And the headaches?

DREXLER

Women develop migraines later in life-it happens.

ANNIE

Look Doc, it's got to be something. I mean, there must be something wrong with me.

DREXLER

You want a diagnosis?

ANNIE

yeah, I do.

DREXLER

Look, you're a dancer, right?

ANNIE

Yes.

DREXLER

You're in your mid-thirties, you run a business, you've been living in New York for how long now?

ANNIE

Fifteen years-

DREXLER

you probably just need to slow down a little.

ANNIE

it's not that-

DREXLER

your life is hard-

ANNIE

it's not that-

DREXLER

I can put you on antibiotics, it'll clear up the lungs-

ANNIE

it's not that. Something is wrong, I'm sure something is wrong.

Beat

ANNIE

There was that Tornado last week, remember? I was on Bushwick, walking to the train, and this huge wind comes hurtling down the street and I sort of stumble, am sort of swept into this bodega. I'm there, stuck in this little cat piss bodega, late for a student, and I'm looking out the dirty fake glass windows and I see this fridge, this old yellow hinges hanging open fridge and the door is banging open and closed, and the whole thing is moving, almost ...floating...towards me down the street, and it's packed with all this shitty food, plastic logos and stringy meat and rotten bananas, and the door won't stop banging around and it's all coming at me and I know, all of the sudden, I know that something is really *really* wrong with me.

Beat

I need to know what's wrong.

DREXLER

Well. I can order an MRI of the lungs, but Annie, you're uninsured, this is a clinic, I'll have to refer you to a hospital and it'll be expensive.

ANNIE

I've known my body my whole life, this is something different.

DREXLER

Fine.

He writes out a referral.

DREXLER

Take this to the nurse. She'll set you up with an appointment.

ANNIE

Thanks.

DREXLER

I'm sure it's just bronchitis.

Getting up and walking to the door

ANNIE

How do I-?

DREXLER

Just keep walking-straight ahead-

warm light

Annie walks into the next scene and back nine years, into the of a dance studio. Amagatsu is standing very still with his back turned, he wears blue jeans and a black lab coat. He smokes constantly. Annie consults her piece of paper.

ANNIE

Sensei Amagatsu?

No response

ANNIE

I'm sorry. I tried to make an appointment. Are you-? Ohio Gozimus-Watashi
Wa Annie San-hello?

*He turns slowly revealing a flower in his hand. In one fluid
motion he presents the flower to Annie.*

Dumbfounded Annie takes the flower. Amagatsu smiles.

AMAGATSU

Goodbye.

ANNIE

No, no, no-wait. I'm here to study.

AMAGATSU

Yes, yes, good, there are many beautiful mountains you should look at.

ANNIE

Butoh. I'm here to learn Butoh. Are you-?

AMAGATSU

What is this Butoh?

ANNIE

I'm sorry?

AMAGATSU

Japanese souvenir?

ANNIE

No.

AMAGATSU

Special noodle house?

ANNIE

I must have the wrong address.

*She turns away to go.
She turns back.*

ANNIE

You're fucking with me, aren't you?

Amagatsu smiles.

AMAGATSU

So, good, you have heard of the great Amagatsu.

ANNIE

I saw you perform at Bard in 98, it was-wow-I mean-boom-crack-holy smokes-I
mean- I couldn't speak for a week-awesome!

AMAGATSU

Yes. A good trip. So what?

ANNIE

I heard you like American Spirits.

AMAGATSU

It's true. I like American Spirits.

ANNIE

Me too. I brought you a pack.

She pulls a pack of American Spirits from her pocket. Hands them over.

AMAGATSU

Oh. Okay. You have brought me a gift. So you are off on the good foot. Fine.

He taps the pack, opens it, pulls out a cigarette, and has a smoke.

AMAGATSU

Why?

ANNIE

Why?

AMAGATSU

Why Butoh?

ANNIE

I'm a dancer, from New York City, I've been in these really highly choreographed rehearsal rooms where-

AMAGATSU

Bullshit.

ANNIE

It's sort of a pilgrimage, I'm looking for a form that better articulates the chaos that-

AMAGATSU

Bullshit.

ANNIE

I can't dance anymore. And I've noticed people falling down in the streets. I saw the first plane hit. Ashes on everything. It's like we don't know up from down now.

AMAGATSU

Okay. I see. That's easy. Here. Up Up Up Up Up-

Amagatsu raises up on his toes with little jumps and motions with his hands-

Do with me.

Annie raises up on her toes, imitating him.

Good, good, so good now. down down down-

He drops lower and lower in a deep plié.

And you too-

Annie drops lower and lower-

Okay-okay so excellent. Good. Up and down. You are done. Goodbye.

ANNIE

No.

AMAGATSU

Goodbye.

ANNIE

No no no-I'm a dancer, I need to know how to dance in all this disaster.

AMAGATSU

Did a boyfriend just break up with you? Is that the trouble?

ANNIE

No.

AMAGATSU

You must throw your whole life away for art. It is not a vacation.

ANNIE

I got into Tokyo last night. Took the train to Yokahama. I'm here to work.

AMAGATSU

I will give you a test. If you pass the test you can maybe stay for a lesson, if not - you go away.

ANNIE

Fine.

AMAGATSU

Tell me the origin of Butoh.

ANNIE

Butoh, the dance of darkness, was born in Japan as a reaction to traditional dance forms and the influx of modern dance in the fifties. It has its roots in Artaud's theater of cruelty and the experience of Hiroshima.

A nurse enters, she stands just behind Amagatsu, and addresses Annie as though they were alone.

NURSE

The MRI Revealed an explosion of an unidentified substance throughout your lungs-

ANNIE

It is meant to reveal the unending decay of the human body.

NURSE

Perhaps an infection from bronchitis, but very dark.

ANNIE

It is meant to reveal the pattern of death.

NURSE

The pattern made me think it was a fungus.

ANNIE

It is meant to reveal the impossible.

NURSE

Cloudy lungs. You'll need to stay here for a little longer while we run some tests.

AMAGATSU

This is all textbook talk, from the University. Does your body know of some butoh? **ANNIE**

Hai.

AMAGATSU

Do you hold your mind hostage in the present?

ANNIE

Hai.

AMAGATSU

Do you believe in your own transformation?

ANNIE

Hai.

AMAGATSU

Do you believe you could dance yourself to nothing?

Annie doesn't have a response for this.

NURSE

If it is an infection we will need to see how far advanced it is. It may be something more serious.

AMAGATSU

You are too serious. You are not ready. You do not have the guts for butoh.

Goodbye.

ANNIE

Wait.

AMAGATSU

Goodbye.

and he's gone. Annie looks around, not recognizing the hospital glare.

Then she remembers and tries to not be so serious.

ANNIE

Lung fungus, fun lungus. Lung fungus, fun lungus. Lung fungus, fun lungus-

A nurse enters.

ANNIE

So. You think I've got mushrooms.

NURSE

Invasive pulmonary aspergillosis, yes.

ANNIE

Why?

NURSE

The x-ray shows what looks like a halo of shattered glass surrounding the pulmonary nodule. The distinctive shape is a sure sign of the infection. We've treated several patients for this in the last month.

ANNIE

How serious is it?

NURSE

It can be serious left untreated, but you seem strong and healthy and so a common antifungal like voriconazole will most likely get you feeling better in the next few weeks.

ANNIE

Okay. Okay. Good. This is good. So I can go?

NURSE

We just need to run one final test to confirm. It's a very simple antigen detection serum that will give us results in the next few hours.

ANNIE

So I wait. Wait wait wait, go go go.

NURSE

For the Doctor. Yes. It shouldn't take too long this time. Do you want me to put on some music?

ANNIE

uh, no, no, I'm fine.

The nurse leaves.

ANNIE

Lesson one.

Annie hides and Amagatsu appears. Amagatsu practices the butoh walk. Annie spies on him. He seems lost in a trance. Annie begins to follow him. Briefly she mirrors him, they are both walking slowly down stage.

AMAGATSU

There is a bag of acid on your head.

She bends her knees and holds her head still.

AMAGATSU

There is an arrow piercing your heart-do not sway side to side, for it will hurt.

Annie holds her torso still and slows her pace.

AMAGATSU

There are razor blades on your feet.

Annie lifts her whole foot as she walks putting it down gingerly.

AMAGATSU

There is a forest of molars in your mouth.

Annie softly opens her mouth.

AMAGATSU

Spider webs lift your legs so so gently.

She is more careful with the lift of her legs.

AMAGATSU

Your eyes do not see. Only reflect. The top of your head is the roof of heaven, the soles of your feet are the bottom of hell. To walk as a measure. That is all.

She continues to walk. He stops and watches her.

AMAGATSU

Do you know Michael Jackson?

ANNIE

Yes.

AMAGATSU

He is very good. You are strong.

ANNIE

Thank you.

AMAGATSU

Too strong.

ANNIE

I'm a dancer.

AMAGATSU

You muscle your way through.

ANNIE

Wanting something really really badly is like that.

AMAGATSU

You have to say "no" more often. You have to say "no" almost all the time.

ANNIE

Okay.

AMAGATSU

You must never give a reason. You are too reasonable.

ANNIE

Does this mean I can stay?

AMAGATSU

Walk without reason. Walk because your blood beats you forward, because your skin crawls into the future, because your heart will not stop. This is how we begin.

The shadow is Doctor Beltram and the nurse approaching Annie slowly across the stage as they discuss her diagnosis.

DR. BELTRAM

Patients name?

NURSE

Annie Lundgren.

DR. BELTRAM

Date of initial evaluation?

NURSE

September 17th, 2010.

DR. BELTRAM

Date of birth?

NURSE

July 14th, 1975.

DR. BELTRAM

Initial symptoms?

NURSE

Exhaustion, difficulty breathing, headaches and an acute sense of smell-

DR. BELTRAM

Diagnosis?

NURSE

Stage four cancer.

DR. BELTRAM

Point of origin.

NURSE

Unknown.

Finally they arrive next to Annie. Doctor Beltram addresses her directly, and touches her arm. Annie jumps forward in time.

DR BELTRAM

I'm sorry. Do you have anyone you can call?

ANNIE

What?

DR. BELTRAM

It is a shock.

ANNIE

No, it's just...what?

DR. BELTRAM

The cancer is quite advanced, we will need to get more information before we make a plan for treatment.

ANNIE

Oh.

DR. BELTRAM

Do you have anyone you can call? Someone to pick you up?

ANNIE

Oh. Ben? Ben!!

AMAGATSU

Don't stop walking.

Ben appears and tackles Annie into the next scene. His apartment takes shape around them; record player, records, kitchen island, couch.

They are laughing.

ANNIE

That was great-

BEN

I know/ so surreal

ANNIE

So surreal. A pool in the sky.

BEN

And the characters, those old guys in the little towels with the rings-

ANNIE

Such a throw back-

BEN

And the Puerto Rican kids-

ANNIE

And the hot upper west side mom's/ with the

BEN

I know-

ANNIE

Bikinis'-

BEN

The carpets-

ANNIE

I know-I expected it to roll right out to the deep end-

BEN

The door guys with those thingy-bobs

ANNIE

The tourists.

BEN

Being naked right in the middle of the skyscrapers-

ANNIE

And kind of floating. Thanks for taking me.

They share a smile.

BEN

Let me get you some cozy clothes.

He heads off.

ANNIE

I'm putting on some music.

*She looks through the records lining the wall. Puts something on.
Wanders back to the kitchen.*

ANNIE

I'm making myself a home.

BEN (off stage)

Go right ahead.

She opens the cabinet of the kitchen island and finds a bottle of bourbon.

ANNIE

You want a drink?

BEN (off stage)

There's bourbon in the-

ANNIE

Found it.

Ben returns with a collection of cozy pants and sweaters.

BEN

My cozy collection is pretty extensive, so you'll just have to tell me what level of commitment you want.

He presents the options

BEN

Least commitment would be these here Thai pants. They are blue. They have a drawstring.

They are and they do.

BEN

Medium commitment would be the long johns. Very soft, very old, totally great.

He presents the long johns.

BEN

Fully committed and a real luxury to boot, my cashmere house pants. Caveat with these is there's no waist elastic, so keeping them on can take some extra attention.

He presents the cashmere pants.

ANNIE

I'm gonna go all the way with the cashmere house pants!

BEN

Good choice. Then there is a cashmere sweater, a silk undershirt, and a flannel with buttons.

ANNIE

Cashmere head to toe Charlie!

BEN

Excellent.

He hands them over

BEN

I will go with long johns and silk.

She hands him a drink.

ANNIE

Cheers.

BEN

Cheers.

They drink. They side smile at each other.

ANNIE

Ready?

BEN

Strip?

ANNIE

One, two, three, go!

They take off their wet clothes as fast as they can and throw on their cozy clothes. This is sort of a dare, getting naked in front of each other or a race, but also the best way to deal with feeling shy. The ground is littered with clothes.

They take their drinks and fuzzy outfits and head to the couch. Ben notices the two gold rings on her right ring finger.

BEN

What are these?

ANNIE

My grandma's rings.

BEN

Two gold rings.

ANNIE

She raised goats in Pennsylvania. She was a woolly woman. Lost her first husband in

Korea. She wore his ring forever after, even when she remarried my grandfather. Before she died she gave them to me. She said they had a twin love, that after he died,

she began to look more and more like him.

BEN

I want a twin love.

ANNIE

Me too.

This is too much and they look away.

BEN

What's up with the studio?

ANNIE

A lot. Too much. I need more teachers.

BEN

I'll teach.

ANNIE

What would you teach?

BEN

The Ben Oliveri exercise regimen.

ANNIE

Oh yeah?

BEN

Fifteen step regimen. You tube sensation.

ANNIE

What do you do?

BEN

I hop. Basically I hop till I'm happy, usually about four minutes and then I dance, like a,

well like a wiggly worm and then I walk like a flamingo and scream and by then I usually have to give up because I'm exhausted-so I have thirteen more steps to figure out. It's extremely effective as a workout.

ANNIE

Let's do it.

BEN

Okay, but it's a regimen. We can only do it before breakfast.

ANNIE

Oh. Well. I guess I'll stay the night.

BEN

That's what I was thinking.

ANNIE

I mean, if it's a regimen.

They smile. Kiss. Ben starts screaming.

BEN

WOBBLE WOBBLE WOBBLE. That's the flamingo scream. Just a preview of what you're in for.

Annie tries the flamingo scream.

ANNIE

WOBBLE WOBBLE WOBBLE.

BEN

Then turn your head and stand on one foot.

He stands, turns his head, pretends to be a flamingo and screams.

BEN

WOBBLE WOBBLE WOBBLE.

Annie imitates a flamingo too

ANNIE

WOBBLE WOBBLE WOBBLE

BEN

Now Hop!

Now they are both on one foot screaming and hopping and trying not to fall down laughing.

BEN

WOBBLE /WOBBLE WOBBLE

ANNIE

WOBBLE WOBBLE WOBBLE

BEN

Don't stop. Don't stop. Otherwise it's not a work out!

ANNIE

This is impossible.

BEN

Hop faster!!!

Ben trips and Annie steadies him.

ANNIE

I got you.

Annie lets go of Ben.

ANNIE

Round two. Go again!

But Ben grabs her and takes her arm over his shoulder. Now he is holding her up.

BEN

I got you.

They are still, looking at each other.

Something changes between them.

He puts her down, they stand facing each other then repeat the movements from before slow and stylized. Ben falls. Annie catches him. Annie let's go. Ben grabs her arm and throws it over his shoulder, he is holding her full weight. Annie slumps.

They repeat this movement faster.

Ben falls. Annie catches him. Annie let's go. Ben grabs her arm and throws it over his shoulder, he is holding her full weight.

Annie

slumps.

*Five years of a relationship pass.
Then suddenly Ben is rushing Annie into the next scene. The*

nurse

rolls on a chair and a clipboard.

BEN

We need to see a doctor.

NURSE

You and everyone else tonight Mister. The world is full up with emergencies. Fill out the paper work and take a seat.

BEN

This is the emergency room.

NURSE

And everybody here has an emergency, get in line.

BEN

She's collapsed. She needs to see someone.

NURSE

I can't admit you without the paper work. Is she breathing?

BEN

Yes.

NURSE

So take a seat.

BEN

You don't understand. She was diagnosed with cancer, stage four. We got out of the hospital last week.

NURSE

Then you need to check her in at the hospital she was diagnosed at.

BEN

I just need someone to see her.

NURSE

We won't be able to take her in with her diagnosis.

BEN

Why?

NURSE

She needs long term care. This is the ER.

BEN

We can't afford to go back to Seton.

NURSE

Well, I don't know what to tell you.

BEN

This is an emergency room, right? I don't know what else to do.

NURSE

There's nothing we can do.

BEN

You can't turn us away.

NURSE

I can't admit her in her current condition.

BEN

What am I-what am I supposed to do?

NURSE

If she stops breathing we can treat her, but only to revive her-

BEN

Are you fucking kidding me?

NURSE

Do I need to call security?

BEN

Is there a doctor I can talk to?

NURSE

You are in an ER, not Starbucks.

She gets up.

NURSE

And it's just about time for my break.

She walks away.

BEN

Wait! You can't just-

She's gone.

BEN

Shit.

*Dr. Beltram wheels on a hospital bed with a curtain behind it.
Ben carefully places Annie on the bed and leaves.*

DR. BELTRAM

Hi there.

ANNIE

Hi.

DR. BELTRAM

You have pretty hair.

ANNIE

Thanks. I like your glasses.

DR. BELTRAM

Thanks. Are you cold? You must be cold. Here. Here's an old caftan blanket.
Have you ever seen one of these?

ANNIE

Yeah, I bought one at the flea market last winter. They're all the rage.

DR. BELTRAM

They're ridiculous. But it will keep you warm, and hopefully make you feel
more like you're a person and less like a patient.

ANNIE

Thank you.

She pulls it on over her hospital clothes.

DR. BELTRAM

My name is Doctor Beltram. I'll be your primary oncologist. I'll check in with you every day and be close enough to reach if you ever need anything.

ANNIE

Oh. Good.

DR. BELTRAM

Will you lie down for me now? I'm gonna touch your tummy. I'll do it gently and I'll try to get my hands warm first before I do. You just try to be comfortable and we'll talk. You just tell me when you feel pressure and when you feel pain.

Okay?

ANNIE

Okay. I thought there was going to be a CT scan. That's why I'm here.

DR. BELTRAM

I know. There will be. But it helps me if I can get to know you a bit before we look at the results-

ANNIE

ouch.

DR. BELTRAM

Liver.

ANNIE

Ouch.

DR. BELTRAM

Spleen.

ANNIE

Pressure.

DR. BELTRAM

Small intestines.

ANNIE

Ouch, ouch, ouch.

DR. BELTRAM

Cervix...you don't like doctors do you?

ANNIE

No. Not generally. You're not too bad.

DR. BELTRAM

Good.

ANNIE

Pressure.

DR. BELTRAM

Spine. Have you been able to get some space since the diagnosis?

ANNIE

Space? No. No space.

DR. BELTRAM

Ask me a question. It will help take your mind off your body.

ANNIE

Why did you choose cancer?

DR. BELTRAM

Wonder.

ANNIE

Jesus. Ouch.

DR. BELTRAM

Vertebra A8.

ANNIE

Pressure.

DR. BELTRAM

Vertebra A11 and A12.

ANNIE

Explain?

DR. BELTRAM

DNA, the basic bricks and mortar of our existence create cells with a function and a life span, a double helix of do and die-constantly, perfectly and always right on schedule. It's happening now and now and now and always. And then there is cancer. A cancer cell behaves like a normal cell right up to adolescents and then rather than serve it's function and die it begins to take over the cells around it. It takes over the cells around it and lives on, indefinitely. Like a teenage vampire.

ANNIE

So you're like Buffy?

DR. BELTRAM

With better technology, yes.

ANNIE

I hope so.

DR. BELTRAM

Cancer treatment is about two thousand years old, but like bodies, cancer is an evolved individualized creature, I have to treat it each time in it's own way-

ANNIE

Me.

DR. BELTRAM

Yes. You and your cancer. They are not the same thing.

ANNIE

Lesson two.

Amagatsu enters. Dr. Beltram disappears. Annie steps into dance class.

AMAGATSU

They are one and the same, the body and it's limitations, the dance is the only honest response.

ANNIE

So what do I do?

AMAGATSU

I cannot give you the steps. There are no proper steps. There is no “way” to do it.

ANNIE

I’ve memorized the visualizations. I feel them. Bag of acid on my head-

AMAGATSU

No no no. The dance isn’t visualization. It is response. Don’t bullshit. Don’t put on good butoh. Don’t get good at it. Don’t make it an answer. It is a question. How do I move this pile of bones? How do I shake around all this skin?

ANNIE

Fine.

AMAGATSU

You understand?

ANNIE

No.

AMAGATSU

Good. This is the way it will be. You come to me in the morning, with the sun. We work. Afternoon we have lunch. After lunch I work, you watch. We’ll see how long you last. You won’t last. Stand center of the stage.

She does.

AMAGATSU

Be honest with your body.

She doesn’t know what this means.

AMAGATSU

Look at your audience.

Does she have any awareness of the audience?

AMAGATSU

Now pour yourself down.

She looks confused and bends her knees.

AMAGATSU

No. Not bend knees, stoop shoulders, lower spine. No no no pour yourself like water. It starts in your guts, it all starts in your guts.

She stands still.

ANNIE

From my guts?

AMAGATSU

From here.

He pinches her stomach. She spins away.

ANNIE

Ouch.

AMAGATSU

Good, good, that was honest movement from guts. Again.

He pinches her stomach again. She smacks him hard.

ANNIE

Ouch That hurts.

He smacks her back. They face off.

AMAGATSU

You want to leave now?

ANNIE

No.

AMAGATSU

Good. There are no rules in this room. Only the discipline to find the thing you need.

ANNIE

Fine.

AMAGATSU

Bend your knees slowly slowly, till you begin to shake in your bowl tummy.

She bends her knees sinking slowly till her legs begin to shake.

Those are your guts. Introduce yourself. Hello guts I am from North American, I have come to meet you. Take them out to lunch. Tell me guts, do you like miso? Give them a tour. Here is exercise: bend slowly until you shake, raise slowly to toes, raise up like tower, jump jump jump....bend slowly...do it again and again...

*Annie goes through this exercise throughout the following scene.
Kaytlin rushes to Ben.*

KAYTLIN

I came as soon as I heard-

BEN

Hi Kaytlin-

KAYTLIN

My god. Good to see you. I just walked out on work-soon as I heard-this isn't supposed to happen to us yet-

BEN

It's happening.

KAYTLIN

God you must be pissed.

Beat

How is she?

BEN

Really bad.

KAYTLIN

God and how are you? This must be so hard on you. Watching her get worse and worse, I mean-watching her basically disappear and all you can do is-

BEN

Kaytlin!!

KAYTLIN

Oh. Sorry. God. It's so unfair. I mean she's so-

BEN

I know-

KAYTLIN

Can I see her?

BEN

No-She's not-

KAYTLIN

It's been too long. Way too long. We were best friends, I mean like sisters you know, before we moved here. This city. God this city. First time in what? Five years we're living in the same place and we don't see each other / at all I mean-

BEN

I-I need to get some / sleep.

KAYTLIN

Can I do anything? I mean anything at all. Bring chocolate? Or silly movies? I could stay for a while, give you a break. I mean-I could quit my job / I could-

BEN

No Kaytlin. It's fine.

KAYTLIN

There must be something-

BEN

I'll think about it.

KAYTLIN

I was born here. Did you know that? In this hospital. I turned out okay, I guess.

I mean, I made it-so-

BEN

I'll tell Annie, she'll like that.

KAYTLIN

I had this dream, couple nights ago, we were driving down the highway. I was in the back and Annie was in the passenger seat. She turned around and smiled, like everything is going to be okay. Today, I find out all this-I wasn't-can I hug you?

BEN

(Not okay)

Okay.

Kaytlin hugs Ben. An old woman enters the room where Annie

moves in *is still going through the exercises. She watches Annie. She*
a gentle circle around her. We do not see her face.

OLD WOMAN

Hello.

ANNIE

Hello!

OLD WOMAN

What are you doing here? So serious. So funny looking.

ANNIE

Practicing making dance. You know Butoh? Watashi wa nihongo wo naratte danso.

OLD WOMAN

I know dance. Tango.

ANNIE

Excuse me?

OLD WOMAN

Dance of passion, you know, lots of ha cha cha.

ANNIE

Oh.

OLD WOMAN

You make tango with me.

ANNIE

I-uh-

OLD WOMAN

Come on, with grandmother, little danso-

ANNIE

Well-

OLD WOMAN

You play bendy woman. I play stiff man. Like in Hollywood movies.

ANNIE

No, I'm-I should get-

But the old woman takes her in her arms. They take position. The old woman seems to grow a bit as she takes on the man's role.

ANNIE

You are very strong grandmother.

OLD WOMAN

Wanting something really really bad is like that.

Annie looks at the old woman closely. The old woman leads her her through the tango steps.

OLD WOMAN

Dom, dom, dom, dom, domdomdomdomdom. Dom, dom, dom, dom, domdomdomdomdomd.

She dips Annie low. Annie slowly lifts the veil off the old woman's head.

ANNIE
Amagatsu?

*There he is, how could we have thought he was an old woman?
He pulls her up.*

AMAGATSU
Good, good, excellent. Today we make TRANSFORMATION. I will leave you for many ages, like four hours, you know? When I come back, you are gone, but someone, maybe something? Is in your place. Maybe you are a deer, maybe a piece of junk, maybe a disaster. This is a good dare. A good challenge. Begin.

He leaves. Annie looks around the room. The Doctor and the nurse enter and check Annie's vitals.

DR. BELTRAM
Patients name?

NURSE
Annie Lundgren.

DR. BELTRAM
Date of initial evaluation?

NURSE
September 17th, 2010.

DR. BELTRAM
Date of birth?

NURSE
July 14th, 1975.

DR. BELTRAM
Initial symptoms?

NURSE
Exhaustion, difficulty breathing, headaches and an acute sense of smell-

DR. BELTRAM
Diagnoses?

NURSE
Stage four cancer.

DR. BELTRAM
Point of origin.

NURSE
Unknown.

*When they are done Annie is gone and in her place stands a child.
Amagatsu returns.*

ANNIE TOO
Hello grandfather.
AMAGATSU

Hello.

ANNIE TOO

Do you know the story of the little fur family?

AMAGATSU

Little fur family?

ANNIE TOO

My grandmother use to tell it to me. You see, they are furrier than most, and they live in a wild wood, a wild wild wood and a wild wind blows through it and there are wild trees and wild flowers that tickle their nose and make them sneeze.

AMAGATSU

Ah! okay. I see.

ANNIE TOO

Ah-choo!

AMAGATSU

You must be Annie too.

ANNIE TOO

Bless me, yes.

AMAGATSU

And so tell me Annie too, do you want to know some of Butoh?

ANNIE TOO

No. Not really.

AMAGATSU

Oh. Okay. So maybe some lunch? They have tempura-it's like french fries- do you like french fries?

Annie too nods her head. Amagatsu tries to work out the logistics of caring for this child.

AMAGATSU

And maybe a little jasmine ice cream as a treat-should I-do you need a coat?

Dr. Beltram rolls on the hospital bed with Annie on it, as

Amagatsu

leads Annie out.

DR. BELTRAM

Are you comfortable?

ANNIE

I'm fine.

ANNIE TOO

No. I'm okay.

DR. BELTRAM

No Ben today?

ANNIE

He's waiting outside.

DR. BELTRAM

You guys okay?

ANNIE

It's easier to be strong when I'm alone.

DR. BELTRAM

He gets it?

ANNIE

I think so.

DR. BELTRAM

He's been staying over at night?

ANNIE

Yes.

DR. BELTRAM

Good. Do you understand how the angiogram works?

ANNIE

It's a contrast dye, right? You're pushing dye through my blood vessels, the cancer absorbs the dye differently so you can get a clear picture of it's location.

DR. BELTRAM

I'm going to insert the catheter into your arm. It's going to suck. Also the dye might feel hot in your blood. That's normal. I'll be gentle and you try to talk to me about things that matter, okay?

ANNIE

Okay.

DR. BELTRAM

Okay. Here we go.

She makes a slight incision into Annie's arm and inserts the catheter.

Okay so far?

ANNIE

Yeah. Sucks but fine.

DR. BELTRAM

So how long have you guys been together?

ANNIE

Five years.

DR. BELTRAM

That's a good long while. Do you have other family close by?

ANNIE

They're in Maine. We don't see each other much.

DR. BELTRAM

I'm sorry. Okay. We're all set. You'll feel some pressure. Here we go.

Dr. Beltram pushes dye through the catheter. Throughout the following Annie too, behind the curtain, draws the dyes circuitous path on the curtain.

ANNIE

Jesus, that feels crazy.

DR. BELTRAM

Ask me a question.

ANNIE

uh, is it totally exhausting being with people who are just like dying?

Dr. Beltram stops and looks at her.

DR. BELTRAM

Some do and some don't. Some times I know right away. Either way. Instinctively. Sometimes people surprise me.

ANNIE

So what do you think?

DR. BELTRAM

If I just saw your paperwork, I would say you aren't going to make it. Meeting you in person-You have a chance.

Beat.

ANNIE

You are a good doctor.

DR. BELTRAM

Listen Annie, You're thirty five right?

ANNIE

Thirty four.

DR. BELTRAM

Your body knows you aren't ready. You're body holds the potential for a very long life in every nerve, artery and cell. You are not done fighting.

Beat.

I'm going to cover you up, then there will be a bright flash.

She does and there is. The curtain is illuminated, a constellation of bright neon lights every two inches, everywhere.

When was the last time you left your room?

ANNIE

Been a week now.

DR. BELTRAM

You'll need to rest, rest a little now and remember a time when you felt really strong and then promise me you'll go outside.

ANNIE

Okay.

DR. BELTRAM

Promise me. Try to be specific. Remember feeling strong. Sometimes the memory can make it so.

ANNIE

Okay.

Doctor Beltram leaves. Annie rests. Annie too steps out from behind the curtain. Ben wakes up.

BEN
Hello.

She doesn't respond.

What's your name? Are you a patient here? Are you lost?

She just stares at Annie lying on the bed.

Can I help you? Do I know you? Am I dreaming? I'm so tired. I hate hospitals. Do you want an apple? Friends brought them by to remind us what the world tastes like. I think they're too sweet. What do you think?

He hands her an apple. She takes a bite. She leaves.

Annie wakes up with a start.

ANNIE
Ben? You out there?

Ben steps into a spot light and pantomimes lifting a really really big rock, his body strains, he gets his shoulder under it, he struggles.

Annie sits up in bed and watches him, then she walks back three years to be with him.

ANNIE
What are you doing?

BEN
What does it look like?

ANNIE
You're lifting a really big rock?

BEN
Yep.

ANNIE
Huh. You okay?

BEN
I'm fine. It's just like a really big rock.

ANNIE
Okay. Can I try too?

BEN
Go ahead. There's one right there.
He indicates the spot next to him.

ANNIE

Oh. Okay.

Annie lifts a really big, she's good at this, she throws it into the audience.

ANNIE

Do you want to talk about it?

BEN

No.

ANNIE

Do you want to get breakfast?

BEN(still lifting)

Do I want to? Yes. Am I going to? No.

ANNIE

Why?

BEN

Work.

ANNIE

Work work work.

BEN

I don't make the schedule.

ANNIE

I know.

BEN

I'm a lot happier with a job.

He puts down the rock.

BEN

Better than lifting these big rocks all day. Hey.

ANNIE

What?

BEN

I need a haircut.

ANNIE

Okay.

BEN

Whatta ya say kid?

ANNIE

You want me to give you a haircut?

BEN

Something real professional.

ANNIE

Sure. I'll do it. Let's get a bowl.

BEN

A bowl?

ANNIE

Yeah, sure, I'll cut around it.

BEN

No no no-

ANNIE

My mom did that to me once. It's called a bowl cut.

BEN

Not gonna fly. Jobs for Nike.

ANNIE

The one in Atlanta?

BEN

I have to look good.

ANNIE

Ballers.

BEN

Ballers.

ANNIE

They always look good.

BEN

So like a buzz.

ANNIE

Yeah. Buzz cut. Okay. I'll do you then you do me. We'll be twins.

BEN

Who said that?

ANNIE

What?

BEN

Somebody. Somebody said we look more and more alike.

ANNIE

Every day.

BEN

Imagine our kids. We'll be like quadruplets.

ANNIE

Come on.

BEN

A tribe of us. Imagine.

ANNIE

Ben.

BEN

What?

ANNIE

We'll have kids some day.

BEN

I know.

ANNIE

Just not for a while.

BEN

It's fine.

ANNIE

It had to be done right away. You didn't have months and months to think about it.

BEN

I know.

ANNIE

And I had already made up my mind.

BEN

Alright, alright.

ANNIE

I love my life right now, just the way it is.

BEN

I know.

ANNIE

How long you gone for?

BEN

I don't know. Couple weeks.

ANNIE

Okay.

BEN

Did Amagatsu ever lift big rocks?

ANNIE

No.

BEN

Did he ever lift little rocks?

ANNIE

No.

BEN

So how do you know he was the real deal?

ANNIE

I just knew.

Amagatsu enters, Dr. Beltram enters, Ben leaves.

ANNIE

Lesson four.

AMAGATSU

Begin the walk.

Annie is good at this walk. She continues throughout the scene.

DR. BELTRAM

I want to start a trial run of chemotherapy for the next three weeks to see how the cancer reacts.

AMAGATSU

seventy two multiply by four go.

DR. BELTRAM

I wouldn't recommend it if I thought you weren't strong enough to handle it.

ANNIE

Two hundred and eighty eight.

DR. BELTRAM

Do you feel up for this?

ANNIE

Yes.

AMAGATSU

One hundred and twenty five multiply by nine go.

DR. BELTRAM

It is the shittiest game of chicken you will ever play.

ANNIE

You need me to stick it out as long as possible.

DR. BELTRAM

Exactly.

ANNIE

one thousand one hundred and twenty five. I understand.

AMAGATSU

nine hundred seventy six divided by four go.

DR. BELTRAM

You sure? Once we start, we'll have to finish.

ANNIE

I can do this.

AMAGATSU

So what is your answer?

ANNIE

Two hundred and forty four.

AMAGATSU

So what. So you are good at math. That's not the point.

ANNIE

I'm good at this.

AMAGATSU

Imagine there is an acid. An acid filling you up. Can you feel it?

DR. BELTRAM

Are you feeling okay?

ANNIE

Yes.

AMAGATSU

You cannot make it better and you cannot stop walking.

DR. BELTRAM

You're doing really well. We're halfway through.

AMAGATSU

It is eating away bones, sloshing through intestines, filling you up.

DR. BELTRAM

Nausea, difficulty breathing, exhaustion, anemia, constipation, hair loss, memory loss, bleeding problems, nerve changes and swelling are all common side effects to chemotherapy.

AMAGATSU

You are making a copy. Be in it.

DR. BELTRAM

You are a fighter Annie.

ANNIE

I know.

DR. BELTRAM

Can you keep going?

AMAGATSU

Now you must dance yourself into your future.

ANNIE

Yes.

AMAGATSU

Can you do it?

Annie shivers through her whole body then collapses. She crawls into her hospital bed.

Kaytlin peeks her head in.

KAYTLIN

Hi! I come bearing gifts. Fresh juice, Ninja Dance Party, hiyah! Which basically means like fifteen dollars with some ginger. I checked with Nurse Amber, it's okay-oh and some nice lotion, and toner, from some magical spring in Iceland-oooooh! and this book-I found it-finally! "*There's No Place Like Hope*" about this woman-well anyway-read it-she beat it, basically same diagnosis so-wow, it's good to see you. You don't look that bad. You look great.

ANNIE

Thanks

KAYTLIN

How do you feel?

ANNIE

Like shit.

KAYTLIN

I'm sorry.

ANNIE

Not your fault.

KAYTLIN

I know. I know. I still feel it though.

ANNIE

Okay.

KAYTLIN

So what's the plan?

ANNIE

No plan. Not yet. Supposed to hear today.

KAYTLIN

Oh. Okay. So big day. I don't understand though. Did you-weren't you-in the hospital last month. I mean, didn't you get diagnosed a month ago?

ANNIE

I did.

KAYTLIN

So?

ANNIE

They missed something.

KAYTLIN

That's what I'm talking about. I heard on NPR-Brian Lehrer I think-all about how mammograms are misread something like every fifth time-I mean-

ANNIE

Kaytlin-

KAYTLIN

I mean it's like these technicians, like the people who read the things aren't doctors you know, so their just like looking at some random sheet and-

ANNIE

Kaytlin stop. Just stop.

Beat

KAYTLIN

Is there, is there anything I can do?

ANNIE

No. I don't know.

KAYTLIN

Please. Please let me help.

Beat

ANNIE

There's a bag under the bed. Take it out-

Kaytlin does.

ANNIE

Good. Now there's some things inside: a wig, sunglasses-put them on.

KAYTLIN

Annie-that's not what-

ANNIE

You asked me how you could help. This helps.

Kaytlin puts on the wig and silly sunglasses. She stands there feeling very uncertain. Annie begins to giggle.

ANNIE

You look so stupid.

Now Annie is really laughing.

ANNIE

Now. Pretend you are me. Pretend you are dying. Show me the biggest baddest death scene ever-

KAYTLIN

Annie, I can't-

ANNIE

Come on.

KAYTLIN

That's not-

ANNIE

I want to see it. I don't know how to do it, I want to see it.

Does Kaytlin do it? Does she go slow and careful and really give us

a beautiful death scene? Or does she make it cruel to get back at Annie for making her feel stupid? Or does she simply hang her head and cry? Either way, something has changed between them, and this is what happens next:

Kaytlin slowly takes off the wig.

KAYTLIN

Have your parents been down much?

ANNIE

When I cry my throat fills with saliva. The saliva makes me choke and choking makes me cough and once I start coughing I can't breath. They have to put me under just to stop my muscles.

KAYTLIN

Oh.

ANNIE

Seeing my parents makes me cry.

Silence

I'm not gonna run you all over the city on my every whim to appease your guilt.

KAYTLIN

It's hard to live here. How is it we haven't seen each other?

ANNIE

I don't know.

KAYTLIN

I'd like to-I want to throw a fund-raiser for you.

ANNIE

Oh. No. I'm not-

KAYTLIN

You need the money.

ANNIE

Our parents are helping.

KAYTLIN

It's not a problem. You don't have to, you know, stand on ceremony. I want to-

ANNIE

I'm not doing the cancer parade, if that's what you're asking. I'm not doing it.

KAYTLIN

I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm telling you, I'm doing it.

ANNIE

Fine.

KAYTLIN

Fine. People need each other. You need my help.

Kaytlin goes.

Annie looks around and moves toward Dr. Beltram.

DR. BELTRAM

Do you understand?

ANNIE

What?

DR. BELTRAM

Why we need to stop.

ANNIE

No. I don't understand.

DR. BELTRAM

There are hundreds of different kinds of cancer.

ANNIE

I know.

DR. BELTRAM

Depending on the kind you have, which we measure based on point of origin-kind is linked to place-then the better job we will do choosing which combination of chemotherapy and radiation to use. What we've learned is that beating cancer is not a half measure. Once we've decided on a plan for treatment the therapy will be extremely intensive, lasting hopefully, for years. The cancer hasn't responded to the trial run and it doesn't make sense to continue to wear you down without knowing more about where the cancer comes from. Does that make sense?

ANNIE

The cancer didn't respond at all?

DR. BELTRAM

No.

ANNIE

After all that?

DR. BELTRAM

I'm sorry. The cancer has metastasized quiet quickly.

ANNIE

How much time does it look like I have?

DR. BELTRAM

Three to six months.

ANNIE

Three to six months?

DR. BELTRAM

I'm sorry.

ANNIE

I need to be alone.

Annie sits down. Dr. Beltram leaves. Ben steps forward.

BEN

Three to six months?

ANNIE

Three to six months.

BEN

A season.

ANNIE

Two terms.

BEN

The entire life of a dragon fly. Ten percent chance of remission to recovery.

ANNIE

A tenth.

BEN

Bad odds.

Silence. Annie is very still.

ANNIE

Can you get me some water?

Ben goes. Ben comes back. Annie drinks the water.

Silence. Annie stares at her hands. Ben looks out the window.

Ben begins to softly sing Billy Holliday's version of I cover the waterfront.

BEN

Away from the city, that hurts and knocks

I'm standing alone, by the desolate docks

In the still and the chill of the night

I see the horizon, the great unknown

My heart has an ache it's as heavy as stone-

ANNIE

Ben. Stop.

BEN

Jesus.

ANNIE

It's depressing. I wish there were more hot tubs in this goddamn city.

BEN

Yeah.

ANNIE

I wish I could see the river from up here.

BEN

We could ask Beltram to move us.

ANNIE

It's not a big deal.

BEN

We're paying enough.

ANNIE

It's not worth it.

BEN

How's your body?

Annie looks down. Shrugs.

I like Dr. Beltram. Well maybe not like. I trust Dr. Beltram.

Silence.

So we wait. Go go go. Wait wait wait. Go go go. Wait wait wait.

Silence.

What are you thinking?

ANNIE

Nothing. I'm trying to think nothing.

BEN

Fuck the numbers. Come on. You are the strongest person I know.

Annie looks at him.

What?

ANNIE

Can you give me some space?

Ben looks at her. Then he takes her hands and puts them on his face, on his shoulders and on his chest. They look at each other.

BEN

You want to be alone?

ANNIE

I don't know. Yes. No. Yes.

BEN

Fine. I'll get some tea. Text if you need anything.

*Ben leaves. Annie tries to just breath.
Ben moves the bed and the curtain past her, when the bed is past,
Annie too is there.*

ANNIE TOO

Hello.

BEN

Oh. Hello.

ANNIE TOO

Is this your room?

BEN

Yes.

ANNIE TOO

Do you want to play with me?

BEN

Now?

ANNIE TOO

It's better at night cuz they aren't scheduling everything up. They get so scheduly that you can't be real anymore, that's when the real sick begins.

BEN

I can't leave the room.

ANNIE TOO

Why not?

BEN

Annie might need something.

ANNIE TOO

I'm Annie too.

BEN

Oh. Hello.

ANNIE TOO

What's your name?

BEN

Ben.

ANNIE TOO

Nice to meet you Ben. We could play sit still games.

BEN

Come back in the morning.

ANNIE TOO

You could feed me ice cream.

BEN

Look. If you come back in the morning with your mom or dad and they say it's okay then I'll get you an ice cream.

ANNIE TOO

That's a bribe.

BEN

That is a bribe.

ANNIE TOO

What's the matter with her?

BEN

Cancer.

ANNIE TOO

Me too.

BEN

You should be in bed. You need your rest too.

ANNIE TOO

How long has she been like this?

BEN

Feels like a thousand years.

ANNIE TOO

What was she like?

BEN

Healthy.

ANNIE TOO

But she was cursed.

BEN

I don't know. Maybe. It could happen to anyone.

ANNIE TOO

Well, maybe if you really loved her, or went through six tests, or like killed a bad thing or sacrificed yourself or gave her a kiss then you could heal her and you know, live happily ever after.

BEN

Maybe.

ANNIE TOO

So do it.

BEN

Okay. I'm the prince?

ANNIE TOO

Yeah.

BEN

And what are you?

ANNIE TOO

Basically just a fly on the wall or a tree frog or something. Don't worry about me. You can kiss her and see what happens.

Ben leans down to kiss her and Annie is so so hot.

BEN

Jesus. Nurse? Nurse! She's burning up!

He presses the emergency button.
Room 107. We need a nurse. Please.

He looks around. Annie too is gone.
I need someone in here. Annie, wake up. Wake up now.

The nurse rushes in.

NURSE

We'll need to get her hydrated. Dr. Beltram is on her way. How long has she been like this?

BEN

I, I don't know. There was a a-I just woke up and touched her-

NURSE

It's lucky you woke up.

Dr. Beltram enters and rushes to Annie.

The nurse and Ben are gone.

DR. BELTRAM

Annie, the cancer is moving faster than I thought possible. It is not ideal, but we have a very small window of opportunity here within which, I believe, we must begin treatment. I'm recommending a full dose of chemo in combination with radiation over the next four weeks.

ANNIE

Chemo and radiation?

DR. BELTRAM

And that will just be the beginning.

ANNIE

But, did you find the type, is this based on the type of-

DR. BELTRAM

No. But we need to begin treatment immediately if we are going to have any chance.

Amagatsu enters. He speaks to Annie as though they are alone.

AMAGATSU

Okay, okay okay good, here is what I think, I think there is chance and choice, the body and it's options. When suddenly your heart is racing and your hands begin to shake you find the chance encounter with your nervous system-

ANNIE

Do I...do I have any chance at...?

DR. BELTRAM

There is always a chance.

AMAGATSU

Choice, in your body, is the only thing, the choice to dance, to run, to be still-

ANNIE

Does that mean I'll spend the last weeks of my life with my body filled up with acids and falling -

DR. BELTRAM

Listen to me Annie. You are dying, everyone here is dying, but all of us, the doctors and nurses, all of us, everyday, see miracles that are beyond anything explainable. Bodies that heal. I have to treat you based on that hope, even if it seems unreasonable. You have a chance.

ANNIE

I cannot go through the chemo again.

DR. BELTRAM

There isn't another choice.

ANNIE

I could choose to die.

DR. BELTRAM

Based on the CT scan the cancer is moving rapidly down your spine and into your lower lumbar.

ANNIE

What does that mean?

DR. BELTRAM

The nerves in your lower lumbar control your legs.

ANNIE

I know. And?

DR. BELTRAM

You have five days at most before you lose the use of your legs.

ANNIE

The use of my legs?

AMAGATSU

Begin the walk.

Shaky Annie slowly stands and begins the Butoh walk.

This is the dance of the nervous system. Now you are ready.

They square off, half way through a lesson. Annie is sweaty and annoyed.

ANNIE

It's been six hours.

AMAGATSU

Okay, okay okay okay so good, no good, really good. Now take your foot all the way up to the ceiling very very slowly. Go.

Annie just looks at him.

No, no no! Don't look at me. I'm not going to do it for you.

Annie hoists her leg over her head.

Yes, but you do it like work. It's not work, it's just your leg over your head.

Annie drops her leg and begins to pace.

Okay, okay, okay so good, you are frustrated, so everything is good. Now for something different. Move from nervous system like a fluttering wing, like a, like a muscle spasm, shaky shaky.

ANNIE

Like a muscle spasm?

AMAGATSU

Exactly.

ANNIE

How's this!?

Annie starts krumping. Like stop motion she raises her arms over her head, drops her knees, shakes her ass.

AMAGATSU

Awesome. This is awesome. Me too.

He repeats her gesture. They are krumping together.

AMAGATSU

So you are actually good at something. That is heartening. Begin the walk.

Annie begins to walk. She is getting better at this walk.

I live with my mom. Great. It's nice. Our relationship is very old. And in fact, she is very old and every day she does the dishes. You see?

ANNIE

Is that supposed to be like a parable?

AMAGATSU

Let me try to say it another way. A man walks into a bar, he is followed by death, you know; sickle, skull, big black horse, and this death character offers to buy him a drink and the man agrees, and the two sit down for a drink and death asks him why he never demanded more of life, demanded a drink, demanded a conversation, a scene, demanded almost anything. And the man is pleased by these ideas and thinks now is the time, when everything changes for me. Then he dies. You see?

ANNIE

Come on, Amagatsu. Really?

AMAGATSU

It's a kind of joke.

ANNIE

Is this some approximation of what you think I think Zen master teaching is?

AMAGATSU

How am I doing?

ANNIE

Not so good.

AMAGATSU

Sorry. I am trying.

ANNIE

I want you to put your leg to the ceiling very slowly without making it look like work.

AMAGATSU

I know.

ANNIE

No, I need you to do something so mind boggling and magical that the last three weeks, no six months, no five years seem worth it.

AMAGATSU

I know.

ANNIE

If I could just learn the walk it would be enough.

AMAGATSU

To be honest, it's impossible, you will not learn it. I tell you this because I like the cigarettes you smoke. You don't get to choose to learn Butoh.

ANNIE

So it chose me.

AMAGATSU

No. It didn't. I'm sorry.

ANNIE

I feel like I'm getting better. I am getting better.

AMAGATSU

Sure, sure. Yes. Better. Of course.

ANNIE

I'm not quitting.

AMAGATSU

Okay no, but I'm telling you that's it. Goodbye.

ANNIE

That's it?

AMAGATSU

That's it. Goodbye. Long life.

ANNIE

Oh. Well.

Silence

Goodbye.

She turns away.

AMAGATSU

And also I have something for you.

She turns back. Amagatsu floats up and plucks a shiny shiny black box from the sky.

Something for you.

ANNIE

What's inside?

AMAGATSU

You'll know when you need it.

ANNIE

That's a goodbye gift huh?

AMAGATSU

Goodbye gift. Goodbye.

Annie walks deliberately home. Across the stage, into her apartment, the box in her hands. She walks slowly along a rail of light, as though on a bridge. The hospital beds, chairs and curtains that have made up the first half of this play are moved back, slowly, simultaneous with Annie's step. The impression should be a journey to a new space. Annie enters her apartment.

BEN

Where were you?

ANNIE

Amagatsu use to say walk/ without reason-

BEN

Dr. Beltram called. Said you left.

ANNIE

Walk because your heart will not stop.

BEN

Annie-

ANNIE

Because-

BEN

Stop it.

ANNIE

Your blood beats you forward.

BEN

I didn't know where you were-

ANNIE

I walked home.

BEN

I was coming to get you.

ANNIE

All the way home. Down second Ave, out to the water, way up and over the bridge. I didn't know if I could make it. I made it.

BEN

Dr. Beltram wants to begin chemo right away.

ANNIE

I think I need to lie down.

BEN

It needs to start right away.

ANNIE

I'm so tired.

BEN

You said no didn't you?

Annie lies down on the couch.

You promised me, two years ago you promised me we would make these decisions together.

ANNIE

It's not a decision.

BEN

Dr. Beltram believes you have a chance.

ANNIE

Dr. Beltram is wrong.

BEN

We've been waiting to start treatment.

ANNIE

It's not treatment Ben-It's not a treat-a treat would be a trip to Vegas or a night on the town-

BEN

Annie, stop. You're doing it again, same exact thing. You told me, you told me we would make these decisions together.

ANNIE

You're talking about *that*?

BEN

That was *our* decision

ANNIE

But you couldn't decide in time.

BEN

You had already made up your mind.

ANNIE

I wasn't ready.

BEN

How do you know?

ANNIE

I know.

BEN

You don't know. I don't either.

Silence

BEN

I'm right here. I'm always right here.

ANNIE

Okay. Okay. I'm sorry about that. We should have made more time.

BEN

So let's make the time now.

ANNIE

Okay. Go.

BEN

So the choice is whether-

ANNIE

The choice, the only choice, is whether I die in there or out here-

BEN

Beltram said there is a chance-

ANNIE

She said chemo and radiation-

BEN

I know

ANNIE

Based on nothing. Based on she wants to see what will happen. Look at me. I'll lose my legs any day now. My esophagus is failing, bile just moves back and forth. My lungs will collapse in what, a week? A month?

BEN

We need a nurse or something, I ...I don't know what to do.

Silence

ANNIE

I want to be back here with you for a little bit.

BEN

We should have some plan-

ANNIE

I overdose.

BEN

No, no. I'm not... that's not a real option.

ANNIE

No. Okay. So what's our plan?

BEN

I just can't imagine, once your legs go, I can't see how I can, we should get to a - I should buy a wheel chair. Where do I buy a wheel chair? I'll go out. I'll buy a wheel chair. We should be prepared. I'll go. I'll be back. Don't go anywhere.

Ben leaves.

Annie opens the box. Light escapes. Amagatsu appears sitting at a bar, a thousand miles away. His back is turned, he speaks to a waiter, whose face we cannot see.

ANNIE

Amagatsu? I wanted to say-

AMAGATSU

天気ですねいつもので。

(Tenki desu ne. Itsumo no de)

ANNIE

Sensie Amagatsu San?

AMAGATSU

ヨイムリ 勝っている?

(Yoimuri katte irru?)

The waiter steps into the light and turns to Annie, it's Annie too.

ANNIE TOO

Hello. I'm very hungry.

Lights out.

Lights up.

Ben returns. Annie is frozen in the same spot.

BEN

It's funny. There's a store that sells just wheelchairs. Time has passed. Did you notice? Did you notice that it's Halloween? Already. Costumes in the windows of shops. Then I saw a skeleton at the bodega, buying some cat food. And also it's so warm outside. Unseasonably warm. So-well-I got you this.

He pulls out a skeleton suit.

I got one for me too. I thought tonight. Well-tonight-maybe we could both be skeletons. Sort of level the playing field.

He hands her the suit.

Trick or treat?

Annie smiles

ANNIE

One, two, three go?

BEN

Strip?

ANNIE

Yeah, but you'll have to help me.

They change each other into skeletons. As skeletons they step into a new space, a party at a bar...

BEN

Hello.

ANNIE

Hi.

BEN

My name is Tom.

ANNIE

I'm Angela.

BEN

I'm Peter.

ANNIE

Michael.

BEN

James.

ANNIE

Noel.

BEN

I hail from Santa Barbara.

ANNIE

Oh. Wow. The beach right? I'm from Mississippi.

BEN

I'm from Alaska.

ANNIE

Texas.

BEN

Mexico.

ANNIE

Seattle.

BEN

No way, me too.

ANNIE

Come here often?

BEN

You know I never do this, you know, like pick up strangers.

ANNIE

We should go out sometime.

BEN

Would you like to come up for a drink?

ANNIE

Grab a nightcap.

BEN

I'll just slip into something a little bit more comfortable.

ANNIE

God you feel so good.

BEN

I want to press into all your parts.

ANNIE

Jesus.

BEN

Don't stop.

ANNIE

We should do this all the time.

BEN

I don't know how to tell you this....I'm pregnant. It's yours.

ANNIE

I'm pregnant. For sure. Blue plus. Tried it twice.

BEN

That's great.

ANNIE

I love you.

BEN

Will you marry me?

ANNIE

I think we should get married.

BEN

I do.

ANNIE

Me too.

BEN

Wow-our child-

ANNIE

Little almond-

BEN

little Alex-is growing so quickly-

ANNIE

It's hard to remember not having a child-

BEN

It's hard to imagine how our love got doubled up-

ANNIE

It's hard to remember to pack all the right bags-

BEN

It's good to work-

ANNIE

It's good to also be alone sometimes-

BEN

It's good to read the paper-

ANNIE

I'm glad we moved to Spain.

BEN

Yes-yo tambien, good to leave the country-

ANNIE

Si. Exacto. Before we are too old.

BEN

We are getting old.

ANNIE

Well, you are-I get younger every day.

BEN

And now that our child is all grown up-

ANNIE

Yes, little Almond is now-

BEN

Big Almond, that's right.

ANNIE

Has a whole life of his own.

BEN

Yes, and I think I will die first-

ANNIE

Based on the statistics-

BEN

Certainly, I will die first, but in a pleasant way-quietly-

ANNIE

In my arms.

BEN

No question.

ANNIE

And I will mourn you, and do meaningless things to not, and maybe some drastic things, some drastic awkward things made awkwarder by the fact that I am in my sixties now-

BEN

Yes, but Almond, little Almond will come home and care for you-

ANNIE

And in my last days little Almond and I will experience some new understanding, some new love, and I too will die. I am dying.

BEN

But we will meet again. Find each other in some eternal place. So that we are never truly apart.

ANNIE

Yes. I think so. But this next part I do alone.

Lights out.

Single spot light up. Annie steps into it. Her fingers begin to twitch,

her head drops again and again. She tries to walk but it is very hard.

From the back the creak creak of wheels. Annie too approaches in the wheelchair. She is very pale. Her feet are blue. Dr. Beltram pushes her on. The nurse follows taking notes.

NURSE

Name?

DR. BELTRAM

Lundberg, Annie

NURSE

Primary oncologist?

DR. BELTRAM

Beltram.

NURSE

Date of initial diagnosis?

DR. BELTRAM

September 11th, 2001.

NURSE

Initial symptoms?

DR. BELTRAM

The first plane hit in her stomach, there was ash in her scalp for a week.

NURSE

Initial diagnosis

DR. BELTRAM

Stage four cancer of unknown origin.

NURSE

Blood pressure?

DR. BELTRAM

One ten over eighty.

NURSE

Temperature?

DR. BELTRAM

Ninety nine point nine.

Annie crumples to the ground.

Lights out.

Lights up.

Annie on the floor.

ANNIE

Ben. Ben? Ben!? They're gone.

Ben enters

They left and I didn't see them go. They didn't get up and walk away. They didn't slip out into the night. They are not here but they are not somewhere else

either-they are not-are not-They've become something else. Is that what's happening to me? Am I becoming something else?

BEN

ssshhh it's okay.

ANNIE

I can't feel them.

BEN

Hold on. I'll pick you up.

ANNIE

Ben! It's started, we're too late, it's already started.

Ben approaches slow and scared.

Annie stares at her legs.

They're gone.

BEN

Come here.

He kneels and tries to scoop her up, it's awkward.

ANNIE

Ow.

BEN

Sorry.

ANNIE

Ow. Jesus.

BEN

Imaginary rocks are easier than people. Here we go.

Now he's carrying her.

ANNIE

How can I see them but have them be gone? How can it be both?

BEN

We knew it was coming.

ANNIE

Hold me up like I'm standing. Put my legs under me.

He does, they are face to face her legs lifting just above the ground.

ANNIE

Let go.

He does. She tips. He catches her.

Again.

He holds her. They are face to face. He let's go. She tips. He

catches her.

Nothing. I can't feel anything. Let me fall, see if I catch myself.

BEN

No.

ANNIE

Just try.

BEN

I can't.

He holds her closer.

Look. We're dancing.

He sways. Annie's feet brush the ground.

I should have knocked you up again.

They do a turn.

ANNIE

No no no-

BEN

I should have married you years ago.

ANNIE

No no-

Another turn.

BEN

Been fanatic about every morning we spent in bed together.

ANNIE

It's happening so fast.

BEN

Bodies are resilient. You're not there yet. Can you feel this?

He kisses her neck.

ANNIE

Yes.

BEN

And this?

He lays her down and kisses her stomach.

ANNIE

Yes.

BEN

And this?

He dips down and kisses her hip.

ANNIE

I can, I can still feel that.

They begin to make love.

Lights out.

Lights up.

Ben and Kaytlin are at a bar around the corner.

Annie and Annie Too crawl across the stage. They are lizards, still and lifted in their arms and torso, dragging their legs behind them.

BEN

She's asleep. She doesn't know I'm here. I shouldn't have snuck out. I didn't know what else to do.

KAYTLIN

How is she?

BEN

I don't know. Good, bad, I can't tell. Thanks for meeting me. She wants to be at home. She just wants to be at home.

KAYTLIN

You can't take care of her like that much longer.

BEN

No. But she won't leave. I can't make her do something she doesn't want to. Especially not now.

KAYTLIN

So? What are you gonna do?

BEN

I keep her fed enough to keep her medicated. I keep her clean and warm and comfortable. That's what I can do. That's it.

KAYTLIN

You need me to make a plan?

BEN

Yes. Make her the best plan possible.

KAYTLIN

Okay.

BEN

Yeah. Okay...I can't-

KAYTLIN

How soon?

BEN

A week.

KAYTLIN

Okay. You want another drink? Or a break or something?

BEN

I gotta get back. Thanks.

Lights out.

Later. The apartment looks more and more like a hospital. Annie is in bed. Ben is feeding her.

ANNIE

I want to go for a walk.

BEN

Okay.

ANNIE

God, a walk, a wheel. I want to be wheeled-

BEN

I'll get the chair.

He goes, but then comes back.

It's really cold outside.

ANNIE

I want to get out of Bedstuy.

BEN

I could rent a car.

ANNIE

We can't afford it. Let's just wheel. Drag me around the block.

BEN

Okay. I'll just-it's what-it's two? I'll pack the pills and water and you should be bundled up-maybe this is a bad idea.

ANNIE

It's been days. I need some fresh air.

BEN

I'll bundle you up.

He goes to get a coat and see's the chair. He's trying to work through the logistics of all this.

I'll take the chair down first then get you-we might need some cash to, just in case, and you need a hat. I'll take the chair down.

He goes. Annie looks around. She throws herself off the bed and crawls across the floor to the island in the kitchen.

She drags a chair with her. Pulls herself up onto the island and crumples her legs onto the chair.

Ben returns, see's the empty bed and stops in his tracks.

Annie? Annie?!

He turns. She puts on her best housewife normal smile. It's scary.

ANNIE

Dinner's ready.

BEN

Are you-? Did you-?

ANNIE

Shall I get you a drink?

Ben stares at her and begins to shake.

See. I'm not totally fucking helpless.

But now she is losing her grip and slides off the island and onto the floor. Ben Moves toward her.

Stay back.

She begins to laugh.

BEN

Annie?

ANNIE

Look. I'm a lizard.

She begins to crawl toward him.

BEN

Stop.

ANNIE

I'll be your lizard pet. We'll fill the place with heat lamps and ferns and crawl around the floor and lap up pills and shit and-

BEN

Stop, Annie.

She picks up speed.

Stop it.

ANNIE

I'll turn green and shiny and and lose all my hair-

BEN

Stop it.

Now she's advancing fast. Faster than seems possible. Ben begins to back up.

*She has him against a wall and begins to climb up his body,
pulling
him down with her.*

BEN

Get off!

They wrestle.

ANNIE

I want the heat in your body. I want your heat.

He pins her down.

BEN

Stop fucking around.

She wrestles her arms out.

ANNIE

Lizard lizard lizard.

He gets up.

BEN

I'm going for a walk.

ANNIE

Lizard lizard lizard.

He goes. She curls up into a ball. He comes back.

BEN

I get twenty texts a day from people who want to help you. Friends who want to care for you, give you baths, wipe your ass, play fucking make believe with you.

ANNIE

Oh, yeah, The Mourners, with their syrupy eyes and incomplete sentences. All they do is fawn all over me and cry and and tidy up.

BEN

The place is a mess.

ANNIE

Help me up.

BEN

No.

ANNIE

Help me up Ben.

BEN

No.

Lights out.

Lights up.

Ben counts out hundreds of pills.

He counts them out by days and weeks. Dividing them up into piles. Also he folds washcloths into tiny perfect squares. This is little Ben's dance.

In the far back the shadow of dancers grows. They move so slow.

Annie, propped up against something, screams at a piece of paper.

ANNIE

Why should I have to? Why choose now? How could you? How much it will it will it will cost? It will? Who I could pay? How to make it? How could anyone else? What to do with? How could anyone? How could my choice? How could you not? Where does it? Why did it? When will I? Where? Where? Why? How? When? How much? When? Why? Why? Why?

Silence.

ANNIE TOO (off stage)

Ben? Ben?! Ben!!!

Ben and Annie turn slowly in unison. Ben exits the stage and returns with Annie too in the wheel chair. From now on Ben will care for Annie too, Annie will watch on.

ANNIE TOO

My skins all dry and hot and itchy and tingly and I can't eat and I can't swallow and I'm so hungry. I want a burger, no orange juice, no parmesan, no avocados. My tummy hurts and I can't breathe and my back hurts-

Ben gets a bowl of soup. Annie watches.

BEN

You need to drink some broth-

ANNIE TOO

I want to go for a walk. Walk Walk Walk!!! I want to eat a hamburger. Drink a big pink drink!

BEN

Please.

ANNIE TOO

I hurt all over. Everywhere. Like explosions.

BEN

It hasn't been three hours.

ANNIE TOO

Explosions everywhere. Now and now and now and now and-I want to go all swimming. All my body all swimming

BEN

I'll get you a cool towel

ANNIE TOO

It's been three hours. It's been six months. It's been ten years. I need a pill. Pill Pill Pill -

BEN

Then drink some broth.

ANNIE TOO

It smells like sewers. Like insides. It stinks.

Annie too swats the bowl away. Ben kneels to pick it up.

BEN

Damnit.

Curious Annie rises and walks to Annie too. She touches her.

ANNIE

Go Still. Come on, come on, make yourself go still.

ANNIE TOO

It hurts.

BEN

I'll get you ice cream instead and then a pill.

ANNIE

Still-

ANNIE TOO

I want it now.

ANNIE

Still -

ANNIE TOO

Now -

ANNIE

Still -

ANNIE TOO

Now -

Kaytlin enters-she addresses Ben and Annie too.

KAYTLIN

Guys, listen, I have all this money, I raised all this money, thirty thousand dollars, maybe not enough but-- You should have been there, you should have, everybody came out and gave something and and and lots of us felt better, you know, not just me, but lots of people, that we could give something and wished we could give more and wanted you to be there, and also felt glad you weren't and looked around and realized, you know, maybe we didn't really like each other that much, or envied the tour you did with so and so or the time you had in college together, and some of us felt nothing but hard and cold and actually hated the whole bake sale mentality and just wanted to get high in the alley and not, please not, see anyone cry and then some of us felt that we really are a community and that we are stronger for this and that- Annie I keep having this dream, this dream of us in a car, flying down the freeway, you turn and smile at me and I, I think you should go. Don't die here. Why not go someplace warm? Why not be by the sea? Why not get some wind in your hair? There is a hospice -I've arranged it, you two just leave. So you can do the thing. Someplace new.

Silence.

ANNIE

Yes. I like that. My body. In a car. Going south. Okay.

ANNIE TOO

Okay.

BEN

Okay.

KAYTLIN

Okay. and Ben?

BEN

Yeah?

KAYTLIN

We'll all be here when you get back.

BEN

I can't think about any of that.

KAYTLIN

I'm just saying.

BEN

cool, yeah, we'll see.

KAYTLIN

Don't become a stranger.

BEN

Are you ready?

ANNIE TOO

Let's go.

The dancers in the far back shift. Annie and Ben begin to sing.

ANNIE AND BEN

The leg bones connected to the hip bones. The hip bones connected to the -

Annie too joins in.

ANNIE, ANNIE TOO AND BEN

back bone, the back bones connected to the-

ANNIE

Later. After. There will be a memorial. An impossible memorial for my impossible friends. I want there to be sprints. On a proper track. The hundred meter dash. The people who loved me should run as fast as they can. Yeah.

ANNIE TOO

(singing quietly)

The neck bones connected to the back bone, the back bones connected to the hip bone, the hip bones connected to the leg bone, the leg bones connected to the foot bone

BEN

Look at all the stars in Tennessee.

And it's true. The stage is filled with stars.
We're almost there.

*Annie begins to fill Amagatsu's shiny black box. Ben and Annie
too
hear her but cannot see her.*

ANNIE

The moon is on the water. The wind is on the beach. The winter flowers scent the air.

I have been cleaning and this is what I found.
Two gold rings for Ben and his next love.

She puts them in the box.
Letters for my family.

She puts them in the box.
Instructions for the memorial.

She puts them in the box.
And that's it.

She closes the box and sets it before Ben.

I am the coast after a storm.
Look, I understand the dance now.

*And her hands become birds and flutter up. Her heart beats
her forward. She dances.
Ben washes Annie Too, raises her arms, and for a moment both
Annie's mirror each other. Slowly Annie Too goes still.
While in the back Dr. Beltram and the nurse make a hospital bed,
Amagatsu sweeps the floor.*

*Lights out, save for a single spot on Annie. She dances and
dances as the light slowly fades to nothing.*

End of play.

Dedicated to C & N.¹

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